

# BRANDED

*By*

ROBERT AMES BENNET







He reeled and toppled backwards down the cliff

[Page 285]



# BRANDED

BY

ROBERT AMES BENNET

*Author of The Two-Gun Man,  
Tyrrel of the Cow Country*



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## PRELUDE

### THE WOLF CUB

**T**HE freak May snow-squall howled down aslant the night-blackened Yamparo hills in a miniature blizzard. Gotch Ear, the huge she-wolf, instantly seized upon her opportunity.

Late in February the shooting of her mate by young Joe Gale had been hint enough for her to shift from the Circle B range north across the divide. Since then she had kept warily beyond rifle shot of the Seven Up ranch.

But the night storm offered perfect cover for a raid, and she had many hungry mouths to feed. She drifted down out of the bad lands like a gray-white wraith in that ghostly swirl of dim, wind-driven snow. Near the ranch she circled widely and came up-wind past the houses and horse corral and barn.

As she expected, several of the cows with young calves had sought shelter under the lee of the feed sheds. It was no time to linger for sport—to gratify her blood-lust by a wanton slaughter of the helpless creatures. The night was cold. Her young cubs had urgent need of warmth as well as food. A running leap took her over the top rail of the high cow-corral.

Her keen nose led straight to the nearest cow. Under the cow's flank her glaring greenish-yellow eyes made out the vague form of a huddled calf. She leaped in and broke the calf's neck with a snap of her frightful jaws. Snorting with the fury of outraged motherhood, the cow whirled to gore the gray killer. Gotch Ear backed off, keeping just beyond the sweep of the horn tips. The cow charged.

When they were well away from the calf, the she-wolf leaped past the head of the cow and across behind her heels. Nimbly as the cow whirled, Gotch Ear was far swifter. In her cross-leap a snap of her great jaws hamstrung one of the cow's hind legs. Easy then to bound in again and hamstring the other leg.

The roar of the storm drowned the bellowing of the disabled cow. But Gotch Ear was far too crafty to take chances. She delayed a few moments to silence her victim. Then she darted back to the calf, ravenous with hunger.

Fast as she sought to gorge herself, she was not yet fully glutted when a sudden change struck upon her extraordinarily keen senses. The freak squall had either swept past or blown itself out. The storm blast lulled and died, as if spent by its own violence. No less abruptly, the snow ceased to fall.

Off over the hills stars began to twinkle. Gotch Ear was already streaking away from the feed corral at top speed. She had been hunted far too often not to know the advantage that the clear prints of her trail in the snow would give to pursuers. She headed



northwest, at a wide angle from the route along which she had come from her lair.

With the first faint graying of daylight Joe Gale opened his ruddy brown eyes, yawned, and glanced out through the slide window of the Seven Up's old log bunk-house. Two seconds later he had on his dilapidated high-heeled riding boots and was yanking the blankets off the bunk of his older cousin, Parlen Brent.

"Roll out!" he yelled. "Snow! If old Gotch called last night, here's our chance."

His eyes burned with eagerness. Ever since the lucky day in midwinter when he had blundered upon Gotch Ear's white-haired mate, both he and Parlen had tried to get leave from their uncle, Taylor Brent, to follow the she-wolf over the divide. After months of refusal, Brent had at last given his grudging assent for them to go.

Luck seemed to have ridden with them. Withered little old Kiowa Orton had welcomed the boys to the Seven Up only the previous afternoon, yet here already was this best of all luck for them—a spread of new snow.

"Hop to it!" Joe shouted in the ear of his deliberate cousin. "You saddle up. I'll circle for tracks. If we find hers, we've got to hit the high places 'fore the snow melts."

Out he rushed, heedless of the uncomplimentary remarks of the disturbed Seven Up punchers. Parlen was already sliding into his boots. He did not

rush to the horse corral. Rushing was not his style. He made a brisk beeline for — the ranch kitchen.

The black smoke of a pitch-pine fire was pouring from the old stone chimney. Between round-ups Kiowa Orton saved cook's wages by wrangling pots and pans herself. Parlen found her frying ham. Little Mary, her granddaughter, was stamping out biscuits with a baking-powder can. Her first panful was in the oven, and the coffee pot was splattering on the red-hot stove top.

"Morning, Aunt Ki," said Parlen. "Mind if I set to? Joe thinks we ought to hit out soon's we can."

Before the young fellow could seat himself at the bench beside the table, ham, biscuits, and coffee were slammed down in front of him.

"Pitch in," urged the owner of the Seven Up. "Hustle. I'll split a ten-spot betwixt you'n Joe 'fyou get that murdering she-devil. She's cost me 'round three hundred dollars since you made the Circle B too hot for her."

Parlen did his best to comply. But he had not yet finished his second helping of ham and biscuits when Joe burst in, wild with joy.

"*Whoopee!* It's a dead-run trail! She got a cow and calf 'longside your feed sheds, Aunt Ki. If Parl wasn't such a hog, we'd be after her a'ready — C'mon, you glutton!"

Out he dashed, with Mary at his heels. Even old Kiowa beat Parlen to the horse corral. She saw her granddaughter's saddle jerked off the top rail by

the slim girlish arms, and she well knew what a ride into the hills with reckless Joe would mean. Yet she hurried past without a word, angrily intent upon viewing the last evidence of Gotch Ear's murderousness.

Mary's saddle slapped on the back of her buckskin pony before Parlen so much as roped his horse. He shook his head at her.

"Better stay home, kiddie. We'll have to ride."

The girl had "forked a hoss" for eleven of her fourteen years. Parlen's jeer and Joe's grin were not needed to hop her into the saddle. With yellow pigtail flying, she flung herself up and on her buckskin. He got under way only a jump behind hasty Joe's broncho.

Even a city man could have followed the she-wolf's trail at a gallop. As soon as the ponies warmed up, Joe spurred into a dead run, and he did not draw rein until the hills humped out of the benchland. By this time Parlen's better horse had brought him up with the leaders. But the older cousin did not take the lead. He was well content to let Joe set the pace. It was already slackening to a canter on the first slope.

Though hot tempered, Joe was not cruel. He soon let his pony slow into a jog. A little more, and the jog became a walk. The cunning Gotch Ear had struck into the very worst and wildest tangles of rocks and ravines and chaparral. Here was riding not only hard and slow but often dangerous. The dashing chase became a tedious and difficult crawl.



Hours were spent getting the horses up and down, through and over places where the crafty she-wolf had bounded at full speed. Yet throughout it all little Mary stuck close behind Joe, no less keen to keep on. She was still more hopeful than he that around each next turn of cañon or ravine, or atop each successive ridge, they would "jump" the calf-killer.

Not so Parlen Brent. He had already lost heart. Hours past he had carefully weighed the odds against them. He knew there was not one chance in a thousand of their overtaking Gotch Ear in this most broken part of the Yamparos. But he also knew what Joe would call him if he should suggest that they turn back. To keep on was a silly waste of time and effort. However, he could stand it if the others could. He had wisely taken care to eat his fill before starting. Joe and Mary had rushed off without a bite.

His patience at last had its reward. Even the bullheaded stick-to-it-tiveness of Joe could not hold to a trail that faded away under their eyes. During the two weeks before the belated little blizzard, the spring weather had softened the harsh crags and savage cañons of the Yamparos with the cheerful green of new grass and unfolding leaf buds. With the passing of the night storm the May warmth had at once flowed back over the snow-sheeted land, to melt the untimely chill with its mellow breath.

The sun had come up almost fiercely aglow. By noon its burning rays had melted all the snowdrifts



except the deepest ones in the shade of north-facing cliffs. The last faint traces of Gotch Ear's trail led up the slope of a steep ridge. On the stony top not a fleck of snow was left to betray the huge tracks of the giant she-wolf. Stubborn Joe at last had to admit they had reached the end of the trail.

"I'm no quitter—like somebody who's been aching all morning to lay down," he gibed at his cousin. "All the samee, an Injin couldn't track that she-devil one more step."

"Course not," agreed Mary. "You've kept on miles and miles, when Parl would 'a' hit in for chuck."

"Sure I'd have headed in—like anyone with a lick of sense," agreed Parlen.

Joe shifted his rifle to thump his fist on his old leather chaps.

"Gosh it all! Shut your ears, Mary, so's I can cuss. I'd 'a' bet my boots that trail meant we had a dead cinch on nailing old Gotch. For it to go and peter out this way—dang the luck!"

"I'm awful hungry," confessed Mary. "Can't you shoot a cottontail? It'll take hours to ride in."

"I told you to stay home," Parlen reminded her in the exasperating grown-up tone of his twenty years.

"Aw, button up your lip," advised Joe. "She had a right to come if she wanted. Don't you mind, Mary. We'll cut 'cross country. 'Twon't take half's long getting back as coming. Watch my smoke."

Parlen loped after his companions to where the ridge dropped off into a small box cañon. Not even a burro could have worked down that almost sheer forty-foot wall of rock. But at the bottom Gotch Ear's tracks could be plainly seen, stamped deep in the slushy snow of a drift.

The horses had started to crop the tender new grass in an open level between the crags. Joe tossed the reins over the ears of his broncho and scrambled down the fissure in the cliff face. Mary followed. Parlen sneered as he tagged in on the wild-goose chase. What was the use of wearing out leather? Joe's boots were even more dilapidated than his own. Besides, by this time, Gotch Ear must be miles away. Only, if he tried to turn back, Joe would scratch him hard with his all-too-ready taunts and dares.

The wolf tracks led down-cañon. Rifle ready, Joe stole around the sharp turn to the left. He peered beyond and drew back to put his finger to his lips and point upwards. First Mary and then Parlen crept forward to stare at the cave mouth on the brink of the cañon's left wall. Narrow ledges zig-zagged up the cliff to the shelf that ran out from the side of the small opening under the enormous top-crag boulders.

"We've got her holed!" whispered Joe.

He handed his rifle to Mary, looked at his pistol, and started to climb. She shoved the rifle into Parlen's hand and followed her leader. After due consideration, Parlen laid down both his own and Joe's rifles. He wanted his hands free on those ledges.

At the top Joe stole along the rock shelf to a niche beside the jutting corner of the cave mouth. He leaned around on the narrowed ledge to smell. The rank odor from the cave told him what he had hoped to learn. He slid back to draw his pistol. Mary was at his heels. He scowled and jerked his thumb for her to huddle back into the niche. Another jerk beckoned his cousin, who was just pulling himself up on the shelf.

When Parlen at last crept along the flat rock to the niche, Joe squeezed around the corner. His cousin would have paused to weigh the chances. Joe only grinned with the relish of the adventure. Yet he was certain that somewhere back in that black hole lurked Gotch Ear. Even a cornered rat will fight. Gotch Ear was the biggest, craftiest, most murderous wolf ever seen in the Yamparos. And Joe had every reason to believe she was guarding a litter of young cubs. She would fight like a demon. In the blackness he would have only her glaring eyes to guide his aim. He crawled into the dark hole.

Parlen had drawn his own pistol. He hesitated, caught the scornful glance of Mary, and followed his cousin. The girl flung herself forward to peer around into the cave. She quivered with fearsome delight. Every moment she expected to hear the ferocious snarl of the she-wolf and the roar of Joe's pistol. Instead came only the glint of a reflected match-flare on a turn in the cave passage. As the light flickered out, the cave boomed with Joe's angry shout:



"Vamoosed, dang it all! Here's her back door."

Parlen's sharp answer sounded less muffled:

"Her pups! Strike another light."

Along with the succession of match flares that followed came exclamations, little squeals, yelps, and thuds; then a wrangling dispute between the boys, begun by Parlen.

"Here, stop it. You can't do that."

"Can't I, though? See there — No, you don't! Leave go, or I'll jab you, too."

"But a lobo pup, Joe?"

"With the Seven Up ear-slit — Hands off, you rustler! It's for the owner to say — Hey, Mary."

Around the turn thrust the head and forebody of Joe. He caught sight of the in-staring girl and called teasingly:

"It's all yours. Catch."

A yelping little ball of fur whirled through the air into Mary's out-thrust hands. She drew back into the niche to look at her fuzzy gray prize. The wide-open greenish-yellow eyes of the tiny she-wolf told that she was at least three weeks old. But she was still too young and too terrified to show fight against the strange beings that had snatched her from among her still more luckless sisters and brothers. One of the despoilers had flung her out into the unknown world of dazzling sun glare; another now gripped her fast, despite all her feeble writhings and frantic yelps.

Aglow with delight, Mary bent to caress her new pet. The smile stiffened on her lips. Her blue eyes



darkened. The tiny left ear of the cub had been top-split with the Seven Up ear mark.

“Oh! oh, how cruel! You poor little thing!”

Regardless of stains from the oozing crimson, she cuddled the cub to her bosom. The softness and warmth soothed the terror of the baby lobo. Her *ki-yi's* lulled to a hurt whimpering.

Joe's freckled face grinned at the two around the cave rock. At sight of him Mary's eyes flashed.

“You mean bad boy! To go and hurt the little darling that way!”

“Little devil! If you'd seen what I kept Parl from doing to her. He——”

From up across the cañon came a frightful scream—the cry of a horse in mortal agony. Joe dashed along the shelf ledge and up a sloping crag to where he could look over at the horses. The buckskin had already sunk down on the grass. The other horses, frantic with fear, were whirling and lashing out their heels. Around them bounded a gray-white beast, ferociously eager for an opening to dash in and slash their throats.

Joe's pistol began to blaze. He could not hope to hit the she-wolf at such long range. But, as he foresaw, at the report of his first shot she dashed from sight among the crags. He slithered down, to leap from ledge to ledge like a mountain sheep.

Parlen had come out of the cave mouth with six or seven cub scalps tucked in his wide, brass-studded belt. He looked hard at the furry gray bundle in Mary's arms.

"Sounded like a horse," he said. "Must have been Gotch Ear after 'em, way Joe bust loose. If he hadn't been fool enough to leave his rifle down below, he might have got the old she-devil. I've done my share — cleaned up on her pups — all but one. Guess I'll finish the job now."

Mary clasped the cub tighter to her bosom.

"Don't you dare! If you lay a finger on it, I'll — I'll shove you over!"

The childish threat brought a smile to young Brent's handsome face. Yet, was the threat so altogether futile? The girl had the inside of the ledge, and she was bristling like a mother wildcat. Parlen cast a side glance down the thirty-foot drop into the cañon. He sidled along the shelf and began cautiously to pick his way from ledge to ledge.

Before Mary followed, she swung around into the cave mouth. When Parlen lowered himself from the bottom ledge, she jumped down past him and darted around the turn of the cañon. Joe was already topping the other wall. She scrambled up after him.

The more deliberate Parlen found the girl with her back to the buckskin, weeping as if her heart would break. One slash of Gotch Ear's fangs had ripped open the great vein in the pony's throat. Joe was heaving hard to roll the body clear of the uncinched saddle. As it went over he turned to the grieving girl.

"Aw, don't cry, sis. The joke's on Gotch Ear. She got your pony. But you've got her only pup that's left."

"I—I haven't!" sobbed Mary. "I pu-put it back."

"You what?" demanded the scandalized Parlen. "Turn loose a lobo pup—one of that she-devil's brood!"

"Yes, I did! You'd have smashed it; and Joe went and hurt its ear. You ought both of you to be 'shamed of yourselves. The poor, tiny, helpless little thing!"

Joe flung up his hands. Girls sure were funny.

His cousin ignored the silly child's outburst.

"My horse carries double. You bring her saddle," he directed.

Such an order bid fair to start a quarrel. A saddle was far more awkward to pack than a girl. But Joe did not heed the injustice. His thoughts had fixed upon another matter.

"Trot along. I'm going back to get old Gotch and Mary's pup."

Down the cliff he scrambled, with even more reckless haste than at his first descent.

His cousin and Mary were jogging aslant the ridge end, more than two miles away, when he overtook them. With him he brought the girl's saddle and bridle, but no wolf scalp or cub.

"Shucks!" he giped at Mary. "You sure played hob, sis. The old devil beat me to it. She done vamoosed with your Seven Up pup. Sneaked in at her back door 'fore I got back. Inside three months your poor abused little petty-babe'll be learning how to pull down calves."



"I don't care!" Mary sought to defend herself. "It was so soft and cuddly, and it cried and snuggled up to me—and you hurt it, you wicked bad boy!"

Joe only grinned. Parlen saw his chance for a double thrust.

"You're both a pair of fools. Joe wouldn't let me knock it on the head, and you let it go. Wait till I tell Aunt Ki. Bet she spanks you and gives Joe a quirting. Why, Uncle Lor figures Gotch Ear has killed over ten thousand dollars' worth of stock on the Circle B alone. If she lives long enough to teach that pup all her tricks——"

"Aw, button up your lip," broke in Joe. "You've gone and set Mary to crying again."

Parlen shut his mouth. He was not really afraid of his smaller, younger cousin. Only, unlike Joe, he saw no fun in fighting. He put on a look of contemptuous indifference and rode along in silence. Almost automatically he began to consider the possible money loss that might result from their failure to wipe out Gotch Ear and her last cub.

His young mind was already as calculating, though not as cold, as that of his uncle, Taylor Brent. Unlike hasty, heedless Joe, he gave much thought to results and forecasts.

But even he failed to catch the slightest inkling of the tremendous consequences in the lives of himself and Joe Gale and Mary Orton that were to result from the escape of one lone, slit-eared little wolf cub.

## CHAPTER I

### ONE FATEFUL MAVERICK

**F**OUR times the four seasons had rolled over the Yamparos.


The spring round-up of the big Circle B and the small Seven Up was almost finished. The ranges of the two outfits overlapped on the divide—that rough tongue thrust out by the Yamparos upon the rolling plains. Its small cañons and thickets and ravines were now being combed by “Aunt Ki” Orton’s few riders and the many punchers of Taylor Brent.

Both owners fed their herds more or less through the winter. But during the fall round-up here on the divide, a severe early blizzard had drifted many of the wilder cattle back into the hills beyond reach. Several of these strays had perished from storm and starvation. As many more had been pulled down by wolves and mountain lions. Yet nearly three hundred head were routed out of the ravines and chaparral and driven in to the bunching-ground on the divide creek.

Not even Joe Gale, just turned twenty-one, rode harder than seventy-year-old Kiowa Orton. Not even his uncle could spot a maverick or read a brand farther away than the hawk-eyed old Aunt Ki. In



face and figure she looked like a small bundle of browned and wrinkled buckskin, and she was tough as the leather of her old chaps.

Hate no less than habit spurred her on to keep working at top speed. Men riding for Taylor Brent were, as a rule, all too ready to use their saddle-irons. A **(B)** on a maverick, no matter how raw and fresh the burn, spelled to Taylor Brent absolute proof of ownership. Old Kiowa had just as strong convictions regarding the proof of her  on the "nigh" shoulder of any animal.

The rub lay in the fact that Brent had so many riders, while she could afford to keep only two hands beside Rucker, her half-wit horse wrangler. Slender, golden-haired Mary, in the full blooming of her eighteenth year, was needed as cook for the little outfit. That prevented her from riding round-up with the others. Her grandmother's unsavory pair of buckaroos, Hooch Huggins and Mex Chavez, who had only recently drifted into the Yamparo country, were none too zealous in the service of the barbed-tongued old cow-woman. So it was up to Kiowa Orton to carry her own saddle-iron and do her best to see every maverick first.

The mothers of these unbranded yearlings had hidden out with them during the fall round-up, when all calves were supposed to receive their mark of ownership. Weaned and separated from their maternal parents, no proof whatever could now be found to show whether they belonged either to the

Circle B or to the Seven Up. Old Kiowa was no less keen than Brent to get her iron on each and every unbranded animal. But Brent's many riders gave him what the owner of the Seven Up considered an unfair advantage.

The hot contest came to a head on the day set for cutting the herd and closing the round-up. On this last morning Joe Gale blundered upon a maverick in the chaparral not a mile from the bunching-ground.

Like his cousin Parlen, Joe had spent every evening at the Seven Up campfire. This particular morning he may have been still dazed from the kindly look he had seen in Mary's blue eyes when she had said good night to him. Certainly he had as little love for termagant old Aunt Ki as for his flint-eyed uncle. His matter-of-course procedure as a Circle B rider should have been to rope and brand the yearling. Instead, he drove the maverick to the bunching-ground, unbranded.

All other members of both outfits had gathered for the cutting of the herd. Even Mary sat a Seven Up pony, behind her grandmother and Taylor Brent. Sight of Parlen murmuring in the girl's ear stung Joe to indignant anger. Heedless of all consequences, he sought to win Mary's attention.

"Hi!" he sang out. "Where's Solomon and the mamas. Here's the baby."

Little old Limpy Smith, the Circle B's top-rider, caught the joke and burst into a cackling laugh. Big Swede, his "side-kick," opened a mouth like a

bullfrog's and bellowed—not that he saw anything to laugh at, but just to keep his buddy company.

Kiowa Orton thrust out a gauntlet-gloved hand at the hilarious pair.

“You—choke that blatt. Rocker, fetch an iron—*pronto!* That's a Seven Up calf.”

“Hold on,” ordered Brent, cold and quiet and hard-eyed. “You're a bit previous, Aunt Ki. What's mine is mine. Look at that Circle B cow yonder. This yearling has exactly her markings—red spot on face, three white stockings on same legs, white streak 'cross the off flank.”

“Do tell!” jeered the old cow-woman. “Long's it's a matter of markings, I'll deal out *two* Seven Up mothers for him. Here, Chavez, put your rope on my calf.”

The Mexican puncher rather slowly started to unloop his fancy braided-horsehair *reata*. Brent spoke a harsh command to his young nephew:

“Rope that Circle B yearling, you fool.”

Joe had been weaving his horse from side to side to hold the frightened maverick in front of the bunch of riders. His rope swished. The noosed yearling bolted, only to somersault at the end of the taut rope. Swede deftly noosed both hind legs and stretched the struggling animal.

Quick-witted Limpy Smith had sprinted after Rocker to the fire where branding-irons lay heating. The two men raced back, neck and neck, each with a white-hot iron. As they drew near, Kiowa Orton jumped her nimble broncho forward and whirled him



in front of the maverick. Her clawlike left hand rested, ungloved, on her hip. She was lefthanded.

"Back up, Limpy," she warned.

The lame puncher jerked hard on his curb. He knew Kiowa Orton. Brent spoke in his stoniest tone:

"The Circle B goes on that maverick. Don't be a fool, Aunt Ki. We're four to one against you."

"Four's only a bobtail, you fourflusher," scoffed the old woman. "Just you try beating me to the draw, 'fyou want action—you or any your bunch of hossthieves. Think I'll sit here and let you rustle my calf right under my nose? Four to one, huh! I'll get my one—you know who."

"Now, now; that's no way to talk," reproved Brent. "It's a matter of fair dealing. I've kept tally of every maverick brought in. You've managed to get every third away from me. Yet I'm running five head of cows to your one, here on the divide."

"Do tell!" jeered Kiowa. "Didn't think even you had gall 'nough to own up to it, Lor Brent—overstocking like that—hogging my grass. The divide was Seven Up range long 'fore you rustled your first bunch of cows."

Brent ignored the insult. He replied with the stony absence of all emotion that made him the most hated man in the Yamparo country.

"I figure the Seven Up owes me a lot more damages than the worth of a little grass. That slit-ear she-wolf already's as murderous as old Gotch Ear



at her worst. Between the two of them, they've slaughtered at least three thousand dollars' worth of Circle B stock in the past year."

"Lord, man, I sure do feel for you. I know every one them dollars hurts you like a yanked out tooth. But why come whining to me 'bout 'em?"

"Because it's all on you. Though Gotch is now so old she hardly can kill a calf, that young she-devil she's trained carries the Seven Up ear-slit, and it was your girl who turned the pup loose."

"How 'bout your boys failing to nail her and old Gotch, too, when they had the chance? Bad! I've had 'nough of your jaw. Here, you, Rocker, come on with that iron."

Rocker stopped the daft swaying in his saddle that gave him his nickname. He slipped to the ground with the branding-iron. Behind the back of the furious old woman Joe signaled to Swede. Each slackened off and flipped his rope. The maverick, suddenly freed, scrambled to his feet and dashed towards the herd, tail up, head down, and blatting.

"Chavez—Hooch!" cried their lady boss. "Get him!"

The two Seven Up punchers looked at the flint-eyed owner of the Circle B, and hesitated. Kiowa withered them with a blast of fierce scorn:

"Skunks! Quitters!"

Lanky, red-nosed Hooch Huggins growled for himself and his Mexican mate:

"All right. Quitters she is. We ain't going to

swaller no more your tobasco, Aunt Ki. Me and Mex calls you for our time."

"I can use both you boys on the Circle B," said Brent. "You're hired."

Joe glimpsed the distressed face of Mary, and rushed in where angels feared to tread.

"Aw, Uncle Lor, le's call quits. We can't fight a lady. Solomon said to cut the baby in two and make an even divvy. Why not go havvers on the maverick with Aunt Ki? Le's barbecue the fatted calf."

"Shut up," ordered Brent.

Parlen had bent to catch a dismayed murmur from Mary. For once in his life he spoke on impulse.

"See here, Uncle Lor, you oughtn't to hire Aunt Ki's men. She needs them. Besides, it's not fair to me. Only last week you again put off starting me on wages. Claimed you already had more men on pay than you can afford. Yet I'm past twenty-four, and better than these stray buckaroos from New Mexico, and besides——"

"That will do," interrupted Brent. "After all the years I have taken care of you and Joe, you both should be grateful enough to work out a little of what you owe me. You will—if you figure on ever coming in for a share in my brand."

The reminder sobered Parlen. But as he started to wilt, Joe swung around close before their uncle.

"Grateful!" he burst out. "Sure, we ought to be mighty grateful. Haven't you fed us rotten chuck all these years? Haven't you let us wear out

your castoff duds? Why, you even let me jingle horses for the round-up soon's I could fork a saddle. Grateful! All these years you've worked Parl and me harder than your bronchos—fifteen years with never a cent to rattle in our jeans, and always a howl from you when our rags got so holey they dropped off us and you had to pry open your fat purse to buy us the cheapest shoddy. Grateful! Why——”

“Enough. That will do, I say.”

“Sure, it's enough! Sure, it'll do! Look at Parl's and my clothes now—and we men grown and A-one riders. Grateful! You, the biggest cowman within three days' ride, and we in these rags!”

Fired for the second time beyond caution, Parlen ventured to repeat his especial grievance.

“Never any wages at all! Yet even before we could ride, we earned our salt doing chores. You know we did, Uncle Lor.”

Not in many years had any member of Taylor Brent's outfit so flouted him to his face. From his nephews the offense was doubly outrageous. He paused to consider how best to crush the insolent young rebels.

Kiowa Orton saw a chance to strike back.

“I'm looking for a pair of real punchers,” she said. “You boys are hired.”

“Hired?” questioned the astonished Parlen. “But—but what pay?”

“Pay be—hanged!” cried Joe. “We'll at least get decent keep; maybe thanks, to boot. Here we



are, outfitted worse than sheepherders. Fifteen years of rags—yes, and fifteen years of working our heads off for Uncle Lor, with never a smile or a kind word!”

“You’ll find the pay all right,” promised Kiowa. “It’ll be top wages. You’re my men now. Go brand that calf of mine.”

“If you do—” threatened Brent.

But Joe’s pony had already whirled to sprint away. Parlen hesitated. His wavering glance met the surprised gaze of Mary. His horse loped off after Joe’s. Rocker followed with the still red-hot branding-iron.

Old Kiowa rested her left hand on the butt of her ancient Colts. Her hawk eyes narrowed at Brent.

“What say, you fourflusher? I’ve called your bluff. Ain’t going to lay down, are you?”

“Cackle all you want,” replied Brent, unmoved. “You know I have never believed in needless bloodshed. But before we get through with each other, you will pay me in full for that yearling. Enough of this now. We’ve already lost too much time over your foolishness. We should have had the cutting well under way.”



## CHAPTER II

### FOR MARY'S SAKE

**T**HROUGHOUT the cutting of the herd Brent overlooked the work from a little knoll, silent and aloof. All other members of both outfits joined in the lively scramble of separating the Seven Up and Circle B cattle and holding the two bunches apart.

Though too niggardly to hire a foreman, Brent never raised a finger to help his men. Yet he always saw to it that every person in his employ worked for him hard and skillfully. If any man slacked or blundered, he promptly lost his job.

His nephews had now chosen to leave his outfit. He neither spoke to them nor sent them any messages. As soon as the last cows and steers of the mixed herd were cut, he rode over to his chuck-wagon, without so much as a parting glance at Kiowa Orton and her riders.

Mary had helped Rucker hold the Seven Up bunch while her grandmother took active part in the cutting with her new riders. Amidst the wildly milling mass of heavy Hereford bodies and tossing horns, the old cow-woman had found no time to nurse her anger against Taylor Brent.

But at a hint from her, Joe and Parlen had kept turning back the freshly branded maverick into the

mixed herd. The taunt of the dare was so aggravating that, under any other circumstances, wise old Limpy Smith himself would have been "riled" into taking it up.

As it was, he could not have resented the insult even if the taunter had been a man. He had to consider Joe. From the time the boy had been dropped at the Circle B ranch by his shiftless father, Limpy, in his crude way, had done his best to be both father and mother to him.

In lesser degree, the other Circle B riders felt the traditional aversion of Western men to attacking a woman. Several of the men, however, were too much like those shady newcomers to the Yamparo country, Mex Chavez and Hooch Huggins, to share the liking of Limpy for straight-forward, hot-headed Joe Gale.

Parlen Brent was neither liked nor disliked by anyone. He lacked both his uncle's repellent coldness and his cousin's winning warmth. But his sound judgment on everything relating to "cow" compelled respect. Even his uncle had at times listened to his carefully calculated suggestions.

As clincher against any attempt to haze the Seven Up outfit, there was Mary. Even had the itch of the Circle B riders to take up her grandmother's challenge been twice as urgent, the presence of the girl would have been enough to rope and hog-tie them. They could neither "smoke up" the smaller outfit with their Colts, nor stampede Aunt Ki's herd. They could not so much as riddle that maddening maverick.

In vain Kiowa flaunted her fourlegged dare in the faces of her enemy's hirelings. Coached by Limpy, they stopped their mutterings and pretended not to see the yearling and his raw brand. At the end they simply rode between him and the last half dozen Circle B cows, and headed for their grazing herd.

Big Swede waved a friendly farewell to Joe. Limpy called out a parting word of advice:

"Play your luck, kid. Miss Mary's some cook. Hey, Aunt Ki, 'f you need a top-hand, mebbe I can be bribed to shift my mount."

"You can, can you? Well, let me tell you, straight out, I'll have no truck with any old brand-blotter who's been rustling my calves for Lor Brent ever since he hung a Circle B iron on his saddle."

Limpy scratched his head.

"Uh—just supposing that's so, Aunt Ki, I must 'a' had a whole lot of practise. Mebbe I could handle one your irons slick 'nough to get you back some your calves."

"I don't need 'em, nor you. Tell your boss from me, I've got his maverick and I've got both his boys. He'll get back neither."

The parting shot brought a smile to the old cow-woman's withered lips as she turned her back on the Circle B. She had exercised a woman's right to the last word. That word had been a taunt sharp enough to get under Taylor Brent's hide—or rather, through the far tougher leather of his pocketbook. Touch that, and you pierced him to the quick.



The taunt would keep working in deeper, like a porcupine quill. It would burn and fester his very soul—if anyone as cold-blooded and selfish and mean as Taylor Brent could have a soul. She knew him inside and out—had known him for years. He would brood over the loss of that maverick, not because he had been out-played and out-dared, but because of the few dollars the yearling was worth in money.

Best of all, there was her taking of his nephews from him. He would stew over the loss of them, not because of hurt affection! She had deprived him of the services of two expert riders, who had cost only their stinted keep. To this injury was added the insult of their going to ride for her.

Kiowa Orton chuckled with malicious mirth. She had scratched the men who had hogged her grass on the divide. So pleased was she that she did not stop either of the two boys when both loped off after Mary to help the girl load the chuck-wagon.

They came loitering back, each close enough to a forewheel of the wagon to rub his worn chaps on the tire. Kiowa and Rocker had started to drive the bunch of cattle north towards the home ranch. The old woman looked from the eager young men to the flushed and smiling face of her granddaughter. She pursed her lips.

That offer of top wages had not been necessary. Even Parlen would have shifted to the Seven Up for half pay. But she did not regret the offer. For one thing, it had helped her jab into Taylor Brent the



full realization of what he had lost by her hiring of his nephews. For another thing, though she believed as strongly as he in working all hands to the limit, she did not begrudge paying fair wages.

Of course she paid nothing to Mary for her work. Women members of a family never received nor expected wages. Besides, the girl was the last of the Ortons. She would inherit the Seven Up—unless her grandmother saw fit to make a will to the contrary. That was different from the position of the boys with their tight-fisted uncle. Taylor Brent had many other heirs-at-law. If he had made a will in favor of Parlen and Joe, he was very apt, after what had happened, to sign a new one, cutting them off with a dollar.

Small chance now of bolstering the worn old Seven Up with any prospective partition of the Circle B range or cows. But Mary was old enough to get married. It was high time to begin thinking of the future.

She, Kiowa, intended to live to ninety or a hundred. Not even to herself—much less to others—would she admit that she no longer relished a hard day's ride. She was still chuckful of vim and hustle and the will-to-do. Yet she did not feel quite as young as in past years. Somehow her tough little old body sagged and gave under the jolts and twists and all-day pounding of round-ups. Yes, it was time to think of the future.

Of the two boys, Joe was far and away the most likable. But so had been his father—before liquor

got the better of him. Joe had all his father's generosity and friendly warmth. No less, he had his recklessness and hasty temper. So far, the cold harsh rule of Taylor Brent seemed to have kept the boy straight. Yet with fat wages in his pocket, it was at least six to half a dozen he would turn his wolf loose. He might even take to his father's great failing.

Parlen, on the other hand, was not one to bury his wages and his talents, or to waste time on riotous living. He was no prodigal son. He could be counted upon to put his substance out to usury. At five-and-forty, given half a chance, he would be as rich or richer than his uncle. Of course he was not so agreeable to have around as was Joe. But what did agreeableness count when it came to building up a big outfit from a run-down brand like the old Seven Up?

As well, though, to sit back for a while and play a safe game. With new clothes, Parlen might get "upetty." Within a day's ride of the Seven Up were girls who had been to boarding school and whose fathers could tally almost two-thirds as many head of cows as Taylor Brent. It would be a good idea to quicken Parlen's slow smouldering with sight of Joe's fire. Mary was a dutiful child. She of course would obey her grandmother's wishes.

The day's drive to the old Seven Up ranch proved as enjoyable to Mary as to Joe and Parlen. She was as utterly lacking in coquetry as in any consciousness of her grandmother's plans. To her Joe

and Parlen were still only the good friends she had known since her early childhood. She had no slightest idea that to each of them she had this spring suddenly become the One Woman. So far neither was fearful enough of the other's chances to have shown any bitterness of rivalry.

The day after their arrival at the Seven Up Joe asked leave to go to town. Though he was no "dude," his outburst against his uncle had betrayed how keenly his feeling for Mary made him aware of his mean clothes. He came back in regulation overalls, shirt and leather vest, but with the best boots and hat to be bought in the little cow-town on the railroad. His blue silk kerchief so caught Mary's eye that he promptly forced it upon her.

Sight of his cousin's new attire roused Parlen to consciousness of his own appearance. He came back from town with less expensive boots and hat, but with two shirts and a kerchief that would stand hard wear.

Mary was too unspoiled for the new clothes to make any difference in her feelings. Though she was glad the boys had what they wanted, she had liked them just as much in their old things. The change, however, had given the cousins greater self-confidence. Both began more openly to show their admiration and to seek Mary's favor.

Kiowa was not slow to see her opportunity and to take advantage of it. She started to drive her new punchers hard. No chance now of their balking or quitting. For the first time in her life, she



eased off a little on herself. But she worked her riders to the limit. They found little time to idle.

Yet neither complained. Even Parlen showed an eager willingness to carry out all orders. For one thing, at its very worst the rule of Aunt Ki was a joke compared with the stony harshness of their uncle. They were inured to hard conditions and constant nagging. Kiowa, instead of finding fault with their work, heartened them with a degree of appreciation. Then there was Mary's cooking—and Mary herself. Joe would have eaten coyote poison, if she had chosen to offer it to him.

Last but not least—to Parlen—instead of working him and Joe for the cheapest of clothes and coarsest of chuck, their new boss gave them the full top wages she had promised. On their first pay day Parlen opened an account at the Stockmen's Bank. Joe spent all his wages to buy Mary a fancy saddle.

The fact that Mary's old saddle was quite as serviceable as any new one made no difference to Joe. He wanted to make her a gift, and he could think of none that would have more pleased himself. That a girl might fancy something different never entered his head.

Night had fallen when he reached the ranch. He turned his tired pony loose in the horse corral and lugged the new saddle to the house. All aglow, he pushed into the kitchen and laid his gift on the lamp-lit table before Mary.

"What d'you say about that for a beaut?" he demanded.



"Oh, Joe, it is! See the hand-carving, Gran'ma. But it must have cost ever so much."

"What if it did? Nothing's too good for you."

"Me?"

"Of course. I don't hanker for frills myself. It's for you."

"O-oh! Oh, thank you, Joe! Only you shouldn't have."

Parlen strongly agreed.

"You're right, Mary. Joe hasn't a lick of sense. A plain stock saddle is just as useful and will wear better than this fancy thing. He ought to've put his wages in savings bank, the way I'm doing."

As Kiowa started to commend the sound reasoner she noticed the soft light in Mary's eyes. With shrewd judgment she held her tongue. The girl had always been docile. If now she became fractious she must be made to obey, even if she had to be busted. But there might be no need of spur and curb. She had always responded best to gentling.

Next day, when both young men were off in the hills with half-witted Rucker, the old cow-woman approached the issue in a seemingly casual manner.

"Wasn't that just Joe all over—blowing in all his first wages on a saddle for you?"

"Yes." Mary faced around to where the ornate gift hung on the wall. She drew in a pensive sigh.

"Yes, it's just like him, Gran'ma. He's so generous and—impulsive. He shouldn't have spent so much."

"Dunno but what you're right," conceded Kiowa.

"I don't like to think of it, but it's just the way his pa started in. Generosity's a good thing—if you balance it with good hoss sense in t'other side the saddlebags. His pa hadn't a lick of sense. He let his liking to give stack up till it sort of sagged him off his balance."

"But—but how can anyone be too generous? It's the grandest, noblest thing in the world, Gran'ma."

"No, 'tain't, not by a long shot—not if it gets the bloat, like a cow on new grass. 'Sides, with his pa—I ain't saying a thing 'gainst him, mind you—with his pa I figger 'twasn't so much real dyed-in-the-wool generosity as 'twas a sort of vanity. He wanted to show off and make folks crack him up."

"Oh-h——"

"Mebbe 'twas also to rile Brent. It hurt Lor like poison to——"

Kiowa paused to cram her bitterness down out of sight.

"Lor was like Parlen in those days—sensible and nice. He'd 'a' made a mighty good provider. Only your pa cut in ahead when Lor thought he had his rope on your ma. That soured him on your pa and me and everything in general. With a good wife like her—you take after her a lot, Mary—with a good wife like her, he'd 'a' turned out a mighty good sensible sort like Parlen's going to be."

Mary looked again at the saddle.

"If only Joe had made it a bag of candy, and put the rest in savings, like Parlen."

"That's it," agreed Kiowa. She screwed up her wrinkled lips as if trying to say no more. "Ye-es — Pity of it is he's so likable — just like his pa before him. That prodigal son in the Bible must 'a' been a dead ringer for Joe's pa. Bound to spread himself, friendly as a yeller pup — and as ready to snap."

"Joe never snapped at me — never!"

"Course not, I was talking 'bout his pa. I don't guess Joe wouldn't never even snarl at you — least-ways 'less he took to drink, like his pa did. I do hope he'll never get his first taste of likker. You know how the habit runs in some families. Joe's pa died of it, just like old Grandad Gale before him."

"But Joe never drinks. He's like Parlen that way. He told me so."

"He did? Well, I'm mighty glad to hear it. That means he's pretty safe, 'less some skunk asks him to take a swig, and that friendly softness of his keeps him from saying no. One drink of likker will set him going, just the way it did his pa. It's in the Gale blood. I hope he never gets a taste. He's a mighty likable boy."

Mary gazed out through the little slide window in the log wall.

"Then you do like him some, Gran'ma?"

"What else? He's easy to get along with when he's not riled, and he's as good a top-hand as Parlen. If he don't take to drink, he can be counted on — to work for others. Course, though, he'll never save up and get his own brand, like Parlen will. He'll



always be just a hand, like his pa before him. His pa always blew in his wages, even before he took to likker and gambling. He never owned mor'n his hoss and saddle and rope. Nary a cow—less it was true what folks said 'bout him taking to rustling after he went off the last time. All I know is Lor Brent got a bunch of cows from him to pay for Joe's rearing."

"The old skinflint!" cried Mary, her blue eyes flashing. "He's worked Joe like a slave all these years."

"Sure he has. Parlen, too. Only don't forget he used to be different. He's 'a' been a good man 'f he'd had your ma to keep him kindly. As for Joe, him being so like his pa, you can figger for yourself what he'd be now if Lor hadn't took him in hand and given him such a strict raising—poor boy!"

To this Mary found no reply, and her grandmother at once started to talk about other matters. Anything more at this time might have spoiled the effect. She was satisfied to wait and let what she had said sink in.



## CHAPTER III

### WOLF PLAY

**H**EEDLESS and eager, Joe was slow to become aware of the intangible barrier of reserve that came up between him and Mary. In his certainty of her candor and friendship he could not see the change.

Her grandmother was not so blinded. She chuckled to herself over the success of that shrewd talk about the boy's father. But the more cautious Parlen kept a closer watch than ever on the words and looks of the girl he had picked out to make his wife.

Had Joe perceived the difference in Mary's attitude towards him, his hasty nature would have made him plunge in at once to find out what it meant. While he still blundered along in the daze of his own feelings, a new player entered the game.

The cattle-slaughtering daughter of Gotch Ear had been driven from the Circle B range, as had been her mother before her, by the death of her mate. She drifted north across the divide, accompanied by half a dozen three-months cubs and old Gotch Ear herself.

The aged killer had become so stiff and feeble that she would have died of starvation during the past winter if she had not driven off coyotes from the

carcasses left by her daughter and her daughter's mate. Since the shooting of the mate, her slit-eared daughter had permitted her to tail in with the cubs.

Though now hardly able to pull down a young calf, the old she-wolf was, if possible, even more cunning than in her prime. North of the divide, safe from the incessant hunting and harrying of Brent's riders, she set to helping her daughter train the six big fuzzy cubs.

For a time the happy lobo family had a glorious wolf festival of killing and gorging. Many cows with calves had been lured far back into the hills by the later, more tender grass. The slit-eared she-wolf, like her mother in her prime, never lingered by a kill or returned to it. That meant danger from man—the greatest of all killers. Her habit was to pull down her game, glut herself as quickly as possible, and steal away to her lair or a distant part of her run, until the passing of two suns brought her renewed hunger.

Now, however, such extreme caution was unnecessary. They were clear of the country where men sought night and day to trap or trail down herself and her family. Also, her mother took turns in keeping watch while the cubs were being taught their lessons.

Instead of a calf every third day or so, one or even two were pulled down with each round of the sun. Along with the calf the she-wolf usually killed the mother cow, either to prevent interference, or to gratify her blood-lust. It was sport for her, and

gave her cubs instruction by example. As a rule, she would hamstring each cow and leave it to snort and bawl in helpless torment while Gotch Ear showed the cubs how to pull down and kill the calf. The cow would then be killed in the most expert manner.

After one hasty meal the wolf family would leave the carcasses of the cow and calf to the coyotes and magpies and an occasional carrion-eating bear. Sometimes neither cow nor calf were touched by the killers. Such were the occasions when, already gorged, they butchered their victims merely to give the cubs practise. Now and then one of the cow victims was mutilated but left alive to die of poisoning from the bites of the wolf teeth.

The cubs learned fast and grew rapidly in size and strength and fierceness — those of them that survived the first month north of the divide. Within a week after they reached the Seven Up range, one had been drowned in a cloudburst torrent that swept down a Yamparo cañon. Another's head was crushed by the chance kick of a dying calf. The third ventured too near a mother grizzly.

The three luckier and more wily cubs had already learned much of what their mother and grandmother had to teach them. But as yet they knew little about their most deadly enemy — man. They had been kept well back among the hills, on the fringe of the in-drifting cattle.

Already, however, Joe Gale had discovered the first evidences of the slaughter. At his report old Kiowa sent him back to make sure that the killings



had not been made by a chance-passing mountain lion.

After scouring the most broken part of the hills for nearly a week, Joe at last caught a distant glimpse of the killers slinking off along a ridge. The three cubs were now grown fleet and strong. They got away with their mother into a jumble of crags where no horse could follow. But the age-crippled Gotch Ear could not outrun Joe's broncho. The mare brought her within fair rifle range, and his second shot dropped the gaunt cattle-killer when she was less than three bounds away from safety.

Kiowa Orton viewed the huge, scraggy white body of the old she-wolf with scant satisfaction.

"Heap of good getting her this late in the day. She was all wore out, ready to drop to pieces. Look at her teeth. Couldn't hurt a cottontail."

Joe grinned at Mary and pulled open the jaws that were known to have destroyed more than twenty thousand dollars' worth of livestock. The once frightful fangs were now blunt and broken.

"Better late than never, Aunt Ki," he answered the tart critic. "But it sure has been a long trail. 'Member that day, Mary, there at her old hole, when we came near nailing her?"

Parlen bent to finger the huge gotch-eared white head.

"Havvers on the reward, Joe. Don't forget we agreed to whack up, way back then, whichever got her."

"Reward?" said Mary.



"Yes, that hundred posted by the Association for her scalp hasn't ever been called off."

Joe's grin broadened.

"Trust Parl not to forget a bet like that—nor a fossilized agreement to whack up, when he's the whackee! Oh, well, Old Fifty-Percent, if that reward still stands, you'll get your split. Nobody's going to call me a liar."

"No, you're just a plain loose-fingered fool, like your pa before you," said Kiowa. "And the Association is a pack of fools if they pay for this used-up has-been bunch of skin and bone. You ain't on the square, Joe Gale, if you claim a cent of that reward."

"Why, Aunt Ki, he's killed her," protested Parlen. "Nobody can deny it's old Gotch. If the reward offer hasn't ever been withdrawn, he and I are entitled to our money. A bargain's a bargain. Any court would give us a judgment for it if we brought suit."

Taylor Brent himself could not have stated the legality of the claim any more clearly. For a moment Kiowa's hard gaze wavered towards Joe. He looked exactly like his father at the same age. Her glance darted back to Parlen. After all, this stand of the older cousin only went to prove that he was on the make. She must think of her run-down brand and of Mary's future.

Joe was frowning at his cousin.

"Judgment—bah!" he scoffed. "Aunt Ki says it's wrong. She's right. I just didn't stop to think,

Aunt Ki. Old Gotch has been helping train the pups, but she can't have been worth a thirty-cent reward for the last year or more."

"No," differed the contrary old woman. "Parlen is the one who's right. He's got right smart hoss-sense. Your uncle himself laid the last butcherings in part on Gotch. She's helped train the pups. Besides her record of over twenty thousand dollars of livestock killed, her craft was still counting more'n most lobos' teeth."

"Well, if you put it that way, Aunt Ki. Anyhow, I don't want Parl to cry over missing his fifty bucks."

Kiowa packed several considerations into a single proposition.

"Tell you what. I'll make it a hundred cash myself—and no split—to the first one you boys brings me the scalp of Gotch's slit-ear daughter, and ten for each pup of hers; or seventy-five for proof you've run her and the pups back onto the Circle B. You'll have to spell each other, a week on and a week off. Toss up who'll get first go."

"Joe's been out. I'm entitled to the first week," argued Parlen.

"Take it," said Joe.

He helped his cousin pack and gave him expert advice. Parlen smiled with outward contempt, while inwardly he noted down every slightest detail. As a result, he came in at the end of the week with one of the wolf cubs. He promptly collected his ten dollars.

Joe went out twice and brought back nothing.

On Parlen's third week's hunt he had the rare luck to blunder upon the she-wolf and her two remaining cubs in the act of killing a calf. He was almost as good a shot as Joe. Had there been no reward, he would have gathered in all the family. But the thought of that hundred dollars made him too eager. His first bullet missed the she-wolf by inches. The second struck behind her vanishing tail. The cubs were not such instantaneous jumpers as their mother. He brought both back with him.

Generous Joe thumped him on the shoulder — and went out to continue a course of study he had been following. He knew that his cousin had stumbled into a streak of luck. From now on the lone she-wolf would be about as easy to sight as a fly on the moon.

But in the scorching days of July his patient tracking and studying began to promise results. He found where the she-wolf had taken to a regular run. Meantime he sent to Denver for traps and a Maxim silencer. He also wrote for government information on the best ways of trapping wolves.

He followed directions with utmost care. Against his wits were matched the crafty brain and supernatural wariness of Gotch Ear's daughter. Unlike Parlen, with his breaks of sheer luck, Joe won by outright persistency and head-work.

On the third day of his first week in August he started at dawn along the she-wolf's run. His first two traps had been missed. He topped the next rise.



Close ahead a gray whirl of fury was fighting the snake-thing that had locked its frightful jaws on one of her forefeet.

Without waiting for a pause in the frantic flurry, Joe fired. Somehow he did not like to see the steel jaws torture even such a murderous she-devil as this lobo. The struggling captive dropped like a shot rabbit and lay still.

Hard as Joe spurred his broncho, the terrified mare would not go within a hundred feet of the downed wolf. He tossed his reins over her head and ran forward to look at his prize.

He had the right to feel proud of himself. Not only had he set his trap skilfully enough to outwit the craftiest of all Gotch Ear's progeny—he had made his trap-clog just the right weight and shape to keep her tugging it along, instead of at once gnawing off the imprisoned foot. She had dragged it nearly half a mile towards the old lair of Gotch Ear, where she had been born.

As he drew near he noted her great size. Though only four and a half years old, she was already as huge as had been Gotch Ear when full grown. Given another year or two, the daughter would have become still bigger than her mother.

Sight of her upturned slit left ear carried his thoughts back to the day, four springs past, when he crawled into the den of Gotch Ear. It seemed almost unbelievable that this great lobo she-devil had been the *ki-yi-ing* fuzzy pup he had laughingly tossed to Mary.



Indignant little Mary—how mad she had been over the slitting of the pup's ear! He had given it to her with the Seven Up mark as a joke, and because of her tender-heartedness, she had turned loose the little devil.

He laid down his rifle and stepped close to spring open the trap. He saw where his bullet had struck high near the bristles on the back of the she-wolf's neck. She lay with her head twisted, as if one of the neck vertebrae had been broken. He jerked her crushed forepaw from between the opened steel jaws.

As if his touch had carried a revivifying electric shock, the she-wolf flared out of her utter laxness into ferocious life. With a terrific snarl, she whirled to her feet and leaped at Joe's throat. His up-jerking hands struck and grasped hold just behind her jaws. They stopped those slashing fangs a scant inch short of his jugular vein.

He reeled backwards, overbalanced by the unexpected shock of her great weight. But in falling he managed to wrench the frightfully snarling beast around under him. They came down with stunning violence. Her head struck upon a stone.

Joe felt his savage assailant suddenly go limp in his clutch. Her snarls chopped off in a short grunt. He let go his hold and jumped to snatch up his rifle. But as he sighted down the barrel the slit ear of the motionless killer again caught his eye. The reminder stiffened his crooking finger and brought a smile to his set lips. He jerked a hogging-string from his belt.

A few swift hitches muzzled fast the terrible jaws that had slaughtered so many thousands of dollars' worth of livestock. This time the she-wolf did not stir. She lay as if her skull had been crushed by the blow on the stone. Joe shook his head, but took no chances. He tied her bony legs with a second hogging-string.

Fortunately his savage prize did not again revive until he had compelled his mare to let him lash the seemingly dead killer on behind his saddle. Though he believed the beast was this time really dead, he again took no chances. He hitched his rope on her as if packing fast a bag of gold.

Half a mile or so from the starting point the she-wolf came to life for the second time. But hard as she sought to struggle free, she could do no more than writhe her iron muscles. The realization that the frightful beast on her back was alive put the mare into a panicky bucking run. By the time Joe got her again under control the she-wolf had been jolted back into unconsciousness.

When they came loping to the ranch the huge head and thick neck of the she-wolf hung utterly limp behind Joe's left leg. Her greenish-yellow eyes were glazed like dull glass, and the shaggy fur was dripping with red.

## CHAPTER IV

### MILK AND GALL

OLD KIOWA had gone with Rocker to mow hay on her leased school-land meadows. But as Joe neared the ancient log house his whoops brought Mary and Parlen running from the kitchen. He sprang off and hastened to unlash his pack.

Parlen was first to find words:

“The slit-eared she-devil! Of all lucky fools, you’re the fool luckiest! Just like you to stumble across her—Yes, and still more like you to pack her in so you can show off to Mary. All you need have done was take her slit-ear scalp.”

“Think so?” Joe grinned and dumped the limp wolf on the ground. “What d’you say, Mary. Here’s your Seven Up lobo pup. I’m not killing anybody’s livestock without the owner’s orders.”

“Oh!” exclaimed Mary. “You mean she’s not—The way you’ve tied her all up. But she *looks* dead.”

“Mebbeso. She must be bled white. Only I wouldn’t put my hand in her mouth—not by a little bit. I killed her dead twice, and she came back for another killing. Maybe she’s half cat.”

Mary’s hands clasped together. Her blue eyes widened.

“I—I did not think it of you, Joe. Look at her neck and head—and that mangled paw. To



go and hurt her as bad as that, and then not put the poor thing out of her misery!"

"The joke's on me," said Joe. "Thought you'd like to see how your petty-babe pup had grown. My mistake. Stand clear."

He drew his pistol. Mary flung herself down on her knees to bend over the she-wolf.

"No, you sha'n't! See her eyelid flutter. She's still alive. Look how weak and sick she is — can't even move her head. Help me lift her, Parlen. I'm going to put her in the old kennel."

Joe could not hold in his amazement.

"Good Lord, Mary, you're not going to keep her alive, are you?"

"Yes, I am, if she doesn't die from your torturing her. It'll serve you right. Gran'ma's offer of the hundred was for her scalp, not for her alive."

"Money be hanged! You've got the right to do what you want with the she-devil. She's yours, Mary, far as I'm concerned. Maybe Aunt Ki'll think different. I'm betting she'll figure on what'll happen if your wolf gets loose again."

Parlen timed his intervention with adroit shrewdness.

"You needn't sneer, Joe. Mary has a right to keep her wolf alive if she wants to. That old dog chain and collar would hold a yearling steer, Mary. Aunt Ki will be satisfied if she sees the poor hurt thing fastened up safe. She couldn't ask for a better watch-dog."

As Parlen spoke he bent to help Mary lift her

property. The she-wolf was so near death from loss of blood that she could not even writhe in the hands of the hated men beings. Her utmost effort at a growl made no more than a sharp rasping in her throat. Joe threw up his hands and led his tired mare to the horse corral.

When he came back, the she-wolf's legs and muzzle had been untied and Mary was pouring hot milk down the red lane of the cattle-killer's gullet. Parlen came from the house with bandages and a pan of warm water. The sight of him in the rôle of assistant nurse proved too much for Joe's sense of humor. He made the disastrous mistake of chuckling out loud.

He sobered quickly enough when he saw Mary's up-jerked face. She withered him with a flash of righteous wrath.

"Laugh!—torture the poor beast, then laugh! I've always known you were cruel, ever since you cut its little ear!"

"Aw, now, Mary. It was Parl I was laughing at. Only you'd better put the collar on your petty-babe. My bullet must have creased her. But when I took the trap off her foot she woke up *muuy pronto*. Came within an ace of slashing my throat."

Parlen did his best to copy Mary's hot indignation.

"So that's why you tried to beat out the poor beast's brains?"

"But you stopped halfway, so you could torment her," added Mary.

It was Joe's turn to flare.

"Guess I haven't any brains myself—when it comes to lobos and girls."

Spurs jingling, head high, he stamped into the house and slammed the door. Mary's eyes clouded with doubt.

"Maybe he didn't really mean to be cruel. If he only wanted to bring her to me alive——"

Parlen looked away and spoke hesitatingly:

"I hope so. Only—well, I hate to say it, but if you ask Limpy or Swede, or any other of Uncle Lor's men, they'll tell you Joe always grins when he brands an animal."

This was a half-truth worse than an outright lie. [Whenever Joe used a branding-iron he grimaced. He hated to hurt helpless creatures. But Mary had once seen that grimace, and now her warped judgment caused her to accept Parlen's interpretation of it. Her head drooped. She took the basin of water and began to bathe the wounds of the she-wolf.

The hot milk had brought back a faint pulse of life through the beast's almost drained veins. She stirred slightly. The rasp in her throat became a hoarse rumbling attempt at a growl. Yet she was still too weak to draw in her lolling red tongue, or even to bare her terrible white teeth. She could not slash the hand that so gently bathed her head and neck and mashed paw and dressed the wounds with old-fashioned soothing salve.

But Parlen saw the red glare behind the still half-glazed surface of the she-wolf's slant eyes. He put the matter with more tact than had Joe.



"It's too bad, but sick as is the poor beast, if Aunt Ki comes and finds her loose, she'll drill her first, and ask questions afterwards. The collar will go on close behind her ears without rubbing the neck wound. What d'you say? Hadn't we better make safe before Aunt Ki gets back?"

He carefully examined the collar, which had last been used on a pet bear cub. The well-greased leather was still strong and pliant.

"Feel how soft it is," he said.

Mary felt and reluctantly gave way.

"Go ahead, but be careful. Don't buckle it too tight."

"I'll not," replied Parlen. He drew the collar strap close. "It's only her ruff makes it look tight. May as well not put it on at all if it's so loose it will slip over her ears—or back against the neck wound."

The last argument overcame Mary's objections to the snugness of the collar. She went in to fetch more hot milk. Parlen jerked up the collar strap still another hole. The rumble in the she-wolf's throat rose to a growl. She made a feeble attempt to snap at the man's hand. He jumped up and kicked her hard in the flank.

When Mary came back he was making sure the eyebolt that held the chain to the kennel could not be pulled out. He stirred the old litter inside the kennel with his boot toe.

"It's nice and soft," he said. "Shall we lift her in?"

"That's thoughtful of you, Parl. But she might mistake it for a trap. Anyway, I can take better care of her out here."

"You can, and of yourself, too. A wolf this full grown can't be tamed. Soon as she gets strong enough to bite, she'll slash anyone who comes near."

"I'm not so sure," said Mary. "I'm just going to try and see. If I'm good to her now, maybe she'll remember how I snuggled her and let her go when she was a pup. If tigers can be tamed, I don't see why a wolf can't."

Parlen had his doubts. But he did believe that if there was any possibility of taming a lobo, Mary was the one who could do it. What he could not see was his permitting this particular she-wolf to become the dog of the girl he intended to marry. He had already won himself the undying hatred of the vicious she-devil.

He let drop a remark that rapped his cousin and at the same time prepared for a riddance of the injured beast.

"Here's wishing you success. But of course, after the way Joe has mistreated her, she may not live."

"Yes, she will," predicted Mary. "She'd be dead by now if she was going to die. I can see she's stronger already."

This could not be denied. Yet the butcher of many scores of cattle had shaved death herself by a hair's-breath. She was still too weak to lift her gaunt gray head when, close upon nightfall, Kiowa returned with Roker from the hay meadows. Mary

was giving the invalid still more hot milk. Her grandmother peered at the huge outstretched, bandaged beast.

“Who’s dog you — Huh! a lobo — that slit-eared she-devil! Alive! And being babied! Stand clear, girl. I’ll settle her hash.”

Mary only bent closer over her helpless patient.

“No, no, Gran’ma, please. She’s mine. I’m going to tame her.”

“Tame the devil? A grown lobo — the get of old Gotch Ear!”

“She’s not a devil. She’s only an animal. Anyway, she’s mine, and Joe abused her. He was cruel. He——”

“Cruel to a lobo!” Kiowa choked back a sardonic chuckle. Here was a point to play on. “So he was mean to the critter. Abused her, did he?”

“Yes. I wouldn’t have minded if he had shot her dead at once. But he had to go and bring her home alive, just to torment — or maybe not that — but, anyway, to tease her.”

“He did? That’s one worse than his pa being ornery to dumb brutes. Well, if you keep your new pet chained, I’ll agree not to kill her right off. All the same, it makes me sore, Joe’s bringing in the gray devil alive.”

Parlen thought he saw a chance to curry favor and at the same time give his cousin a knock.

“You don’t have to pay him that hundred, Aunt Ki. Your offer to us was for her scalp. That meant for killing her.”



“But, Gran’ma,” hesitated Mary, her sense of justice struggling against her indignation against the offender, “you didn’t say ‘killed,’ and he has brought in her scalp along with the rest of her.”

“Yes, just to show off to you and be ornery to the poor beast,” said Parlen.

Old Kiowa chimed in, well pleased to advance their common purpose.

“From what you say, Mary, he dragged the cripple in to tease you. That lets me out on the reward— ’less he finishes busting her head when he finds he’s got to hand over her scalp ’fore he gets his hundred. Come on in now. I could eat a steer—horns, hoofs and hide.”

Joe had fallen asleep in Kiowa’s old rocking chair when he first entered the kitchen. His keenness to get the she-wolf had kept him from taking more than a few brief naps during his two nights out in the hills. Roused by a touch of his cousin’s boot toe, he came to the supper table aglow with his usual friendly good-humor. He was generously willing to forget Mary’s unfair crossness.

Mary, still hurt and indignant, mistook this for callous indifference to what he had done. Dashed by her cold look, but still proud of his success, he started to tell Kiowa how he had trapped and shot and out-fought the cattle-killer. The old woman cut in with venom on her tongue.

“That’ll do, young man. It’s bad ’nough, way you mishandled the critter, ’thout you having to brag of it. What’s more, I won’t pay you a cent of

that hundred. You didn't fetch me her scalp. You packed in the miser'ble suffering critter alive—to tease Mary."

The bitter injustice of this brought a grimace of distress to Joe's face. He looked to Mary for a defender, and saw her eyes widen with reproach. He did not realize that she had mistaken his grimace for a grin of cruel mirth. Aunt Ki's tobasco, like his uncle's stony harshness, went with the day's work. Easy enough to throw it over his shoulder. Far different, though, for Mary to be so unfair to a fellow.

He shoved back from the table and slammed out into the night.

"The gall of him!" cried Kiowa, her hawk eyes on Mary's clouded face. "Him grinning that way over what he's done, then getting mad 'cause we didn't pat him on the back for it. I told you he's just like his ornery father— What's that?"

Out in the darkness the she-wolf, despite her great weakness, had been put on the alert by Joe's noisy out-rush. She caught his scent, the scent of the enemy who had trapped and shot and out-fought her. In a flurry of rage, she sought to bound up. But she lacked strength to more than twist her legs and body. The pain of her crushed foot shrilled her snarls into a yelp of agony. This was what had broken off Kiowa's scathing denunciation.

"He's abusing the helpless beast again," said Parlen. "I'll make him quit."

He hurried out. Mary burst into tears.

Joe had stalked away to the bunk-house, too hurt by Mary's unfairness to heed the out-cry of the she-wolf. His cousin located the prostrate lobo by the flare of a match, and won another yelp from her with a kick in the neck. Back near the door he snapped a sharp but low-spoken order for Joe to clear out and stay away. He knew that his cousin was too far off to hear him. After a pause, he went back into the kitchen.

"Don't cry, Mary," he said. "He won't hurt her any more — at least not tonight."

The girl beamed at him through her tears.

"Oh, thank you, Parl. You—you're the one who's really good-hearted."

Parlen looked as modest as he could.

"I don't pretend to be soft, Mary. I'd have killed your lobo. I wouldn't stop a minute over killing anything that hurt you or Aunt Ki—or myself. We've got the right to protect ourselves and our interests. You remember the time I snuffed out those other pups of old Gotch Ear? Joe had to go and keep this one, just to torment it—same as he's done and is doing now."

A fresh flare of indignation dried up Mary's tears. Her grandmother ordered Parlen to the bunk-house and at once went to bed herself. Better to leave the girl to brood over the matter. It would sink in deeper than if she were allowed to talk off her hurt anger.

In the morning, having slept off his own hurt feelings, Joe tried to make up. The she-wolf was al-



ready able to lift her massive head a little. Joe offered to hold her while Mary looked to the wounds. The girl coldly refused his aid. Parlen smiled and stepped in, only to jump back at the ferocious snarl and snap of the wolf.

Before Joe could interfere, the girl bent down to feed her savage pet. But she was not foolishly overconfident. She kept the hand with which she held the pan of warm milk just beyond reach of those gleaming white fangs. The she-wolf continued to bristle and growl. Yet the scent of the girl was already associated in her fierce brain with the hands that had so gently soothed her burning wounds and eased her fever-thirst with the hot white fluid.

The yellow-haired human was again offering her the white drink. In her cubhood she had been taught by Gotch Ear never to touch meat that bore the slightest taint of man scent, nor to so much as go near any carcass, not even one of her own kills. Two or three times her mother had shown her from a distance the bodies of poisoned coyotes lying around a recently killed calf. In the years that followed, her acquired suspiciousness had become as deep-rooted as the innate wiliness of her nature.

But this soft-voiced human had helped rather than hurt her. What she now offered was not meat, but more of the drink that recalled a memory-taste vaguely linked with a sensation of warmth and protection. Even more keenly than a dog, a wolf remembers through its nose. Perhaps less dimly than the taste of her mother's milk, the she-wolf recalled

the scent of the human who once had caught her in mid-air to cuddle her close in a warm softness and croon away her terror.

The scent of this human was the same; as, also, was the soft, crooning voice. The wolf did not remember as men remember, with clear consciousness and reason. But she was capable of feeling with fierce intensity. The girl's scent increasingly stirred in her savage brain pleasurable thrills that added strength to her recent favorable impressions of the owner of the scent.

Torn between distrust and the pull of Mary's friendliness, the gray beast lay in an agony of doubt. The irritation of indecision worked her into a fury. Her growls heightened to a weak yet frightful snarl. She sought to pull herself up on her forefeet. The effort was too great. She sank down again prone on the ground and lay silent, exhausted.

Mary fearlessly lifted the great gaunt head and held the pan of milk under the down-lolling tongue. The fever of the beast's blood-loss and wounds had left her more than ever famished with thirst. Unable to resist the taste of the fluid, she began to lap it up.

The girl brought panful after panful, until the she-wolf could drink no more. The neck and head bandages had been fastened on too securely for the almost powerless beast to scratch them off. But she had managed to rip away the dressings on her crushed paw. Mary washed and dressed it again and bound on splints to hold the broken bones. The

reviving beast growled and snarled and sought to snap the ministering hands. Mary kept to her soothing talk and persisted with her doctoring.

“She’ll chew that off, soon’s she gets strong enough,” predicted Joe. “You oughtn’t to waste your time on her. If you’d seen how she hamstrung some of the cows and left ’em to starve——”

“She was only a wild wolf, not a man who ought to know better than torture helpless things!” flared Mary.

She turned her back on Joe in a way that sent him hurrying off to seek in hard work a numbing of his fresh hurt.



## CHAPTER V

### IN BAD

**T**HE two weeks that followed brought no relentment in Mary's stand against Joe. His well-meant prediction that the captive would again tear off the foot dressings served only to increase the girl's indignation against him when it came true.

Time after time she renewed the dressing and splints and bandages, and time after time the she-wolf ripped all off. The licking of her tongue may have healed the torn skin and tendons more rapidly than any salve would have done. But without the support of splints, the broken bones kept moving about. They failed to knit together. Though the paw healed, the toes splayed wide and loose, like the foot of a half-grown inbred Saint Bernard dog.

For the first few days, however, Mary had her way over the neck and head bandages. Her savage pet still lacked strength to scratch them off. But the she-wolf possessed a vitality even greater than the usual extraordinary toughness and tenacity of her breed. She was in her prime and she was the daughter of Gotch Ear. On the third day her ravenous hunger, coupled with Mary's persuasiveness, had brought her to the point of eating cooked meat, along with the milk. After that her strength came back with amazing rapidity.

The first time the beast staggered to her feet and snarled at Kiowa, Mary's quick jump between alone stopped the out-thrusting of the ancient Colts.

"Please, Gran'ma," the girl begged. "You promised. It's only that she's afraid you'll hurt her. Look."

Without a trace of fear, the girl stepped around and put her hand on the bristling neck of the beast.

"Lord!" gasped Kiowa. "Jump — *pronto!*"

Mary smiled and tickled behind the she-wolf's slit ear. The snarling beast did not whirl and slash the venturesome hand. She did not seem to be aware of it. Her glaring eyes remained fixed on Kiowa. But gradually her snarls died down into a low rumbling growl.

"You see," said Mary. "She's not afraid of me."

Kiowa slowly shoved her revolver back into its worn holster.

"Well, I'll be — switched! If you ain't gone and gentled the big she-devil."

"Yes, but I told you, Gran'ma, she's not a devil. And she's not a wild wolf now, either. She's my wolf-dog. Please make friends with her."

"Like fun I will! I ain't disremembering you got me to come in paw reach of your bear-cub. That claw scratch on my leg ain't never healed right yet. As for this splay-foot devil, I'll drill her scalp before ever I put a hand on it. No use warning you to shy clear of her. I know that."

"Why, Gran'ma, she's perfectly safe."

"Safe till she takes a notion to slash you or some-

one else. If she does I'll make her safe for keeps."

Parlen did not hear this. That evening, after dark, he came in with a gash through the outer side of his right boot and instep. He accused Rocker of having left one of the pitchforks under a bunch of hay in the barn. The half-witted wrangler only gaped. Mary dressed the gashed foot almost as concernedly as she had bandaged the she-wolf's paw.

At dawn Joe, first up as usual, noticed an iron-wood club lying beside the dog kennel. The she-wolf had gnawed it half into splinters. Dark red spots made a trail from near the kennel to the kitchen door. None could be seen on the path to the barn. Joe grinned at the writhing lips of the she-wolf. He had no need to ask his cousin if the "pitchfork prong" had not been one of those long white fangs.

Unluckily for him, Mary just then came around the corner of the house with the she-wolf's breakfast. She saw his grin. They were alone. The breach between them was not yet too wide for her to have listened to explanations. But Joe's hasty nature could not withstand the fresh wound to his pride made by her indignant look. He turned away without a word. Mary saw the splintered club, and, what was worse, she saw fresh bruises on the head and flank of the chained wolf.

After this her manner towards Joe became more and more constrained. Still harder for him to bear was the closeness with which she kept watch whenever he might have had a chance to harm her pet. As a result, he took particular pains to avoid going



near the chained lobo. Old Kiowa chuckled to herself and casually remarked to Mary that the way Joe was fighting shy of "Splay Foot," he must be feeling guilty over something he had done to the gray devil—or planned to do.

Parlen did not chuckle, either openly or to himself. Though he was merely cool and quiet where his uncle was stony cold, he possessed all his uncle's inexorable vindictiveness. The she-wolf had bitten him. He made no allowance for the fact that she had slashed his foot while he was attempting to beat her to death. On the contrary, his rancor against her was all the more poisonous because she had shown enough strength and courage to scare him off. Thinking her stunned by his first blows, he had stepped around to kick her. Before his boot could thud into her flank she had snapped his foot. The sudden ferocity of her counter-attack had so startled him that he had dropped his club and ran.

Mary's kindness to the beast rasped his meanly jealous nature. He had been balked in his first attempt to get rid of the hated creature. His chances for a second attempt were shut off by the girl's vigilance against Joe. To see the she-wolf so rapidly recovering from her injuries filled him with cold fury. He dared not harm the beast unless he could do it in a way that would put the blame on his cousin. But the young fool persisted in keeping away from the kennel.

The longed-for opportunity came at last, late in August. An unfavorable season had resulted in a

short hay crop. Kiowa thought to forestall the future by preparing her banker for a renewal of the note she had given him in the spring. All the money she would get in from the sale of beef steers in the fall round-up might be needed to carry the rest of her stock over the winter.

As the ranch was short of food and other supplies, she insisted upon Mary driving to town with her in the chuck wagon. Ordinarily the girl would have been glad of the change. Now, however, she had her pet to consider. Old Kiowa laughed derisively at the suggestion that they take the wolf chained in the wagon.

"Nobody ever called me a fool—and proved it," she said. "I won't have folks say I've begun to doddle from old age. You can take Splay Foot's scalp, if you like. The rest of her stays here."

Mary sought out a chance to speak alone with Parlen while Joe was hitching up the wagon team.

"Parl, you'll—you'll keep an eye on my wolf for me, won't you? I want her fed and—watched."

"Sure," he agreed. "You know you can trust me, Mary. You know I'll do anything to get you—I mean, get you to like me. Of course I can't keep watch night and day. But I'll do my best. I don't think he'll dare do anything if he sees I've taken your place looking out for her."

The girl gave him a rueful glance.

"Oh, Parl, if only I could like you all you deserve!"

Parlen blinked, uncertain just how to take this.

It was hard for him to believe that even she could be absolutely sincere. The momentary delay lost him his golden opportunity. Frightened by her impulsive outburst, Mary ran to take the reins of the restless team. The chuck-wagon rattled off in a cloud of dust.

By horseback, using cut-offs, the trip to town and return could be made in a day and a half. A wagon, going around by road, took longer, and Kiowa's parting word had been that she would not start back from town until the morning of the third day. Parlen set about his plans with even more than his usual deliberation.

As his first move he invited Joe to witness the feeding of "Splay Foot." Joe grinned and countered by inviting Rucker to the party. Great was his surprise when for the first time in two weeks he saw the beast that he had brought in so desperately wounded and weak. She was running back and forth around the three-quarter circle to which the taut chain held her. The broken forepaw splayed out every time she put her weight upon it, yet it seemed neither to pain nor to cripple her.

As the three men rounded the corner of the kitchen she stopped short at the far end of her run and crouched low. Deceived by her seeming fear, they came on rather carelessly. They crossed the circular path worn by her days of swinging around at the end of the long chain.

With a yell of fury, the captive rushed at them, straight across the circle. Parlen dropped his pan



of meat and jumped backwards. Joe was a trifle delayed. He had to drag after him the slow-witted Rocker. The jaws of the enraged she-wolf were gaping to slash the horse-wrangler's leg when the chain jerked taut. The shock was so violent that the snarling beast hurled heels over head, knocking Rocker onto his face.

The wonder was that neither the chain nor the wolf's neck broke. She thudded hard upon the sun-baked ground. Yet almost quicker than eye could follow, she swirled her body back around, so that she could confront the hated humans. She reared up at the end of the chain, slavering and yelling with frantic rage.

Joe knocked up Parlen's out-thrusting pistol.

"No, you don't. She belongs to Mary," he shouted above the mad clamor of the wolf. "Get up, Rocker. She didn't even nip you."

Parlen backed around the corner of the house, still holding his pistol ready. The she-wolf had given him one of the worst scares of his life. Joe helped up the frightened horse-wrangler, kicked Splay Foot's meat inside her circle, and set off for the hay meadows with Rocker.

After this he stayed away from the chained beast. But, without seeming to do so, he kept watch on his cousin's rather wooden face. Morning of the third day he noticed a slight change in Parlen's cool, calculating eyes.

Old Kiowa's last orders had been for them to keep on hauling hay to the feed sheds. There were two

haystacks. While Joe and Parlen drove in with highpeaked loads, Roker raked up the windrows of cured hay.

When towards noon, the young men came in with their second loads, Joe noticed that his cousin so mishandled his pitchfork that several trusses of hay slipped off the stack he was building. As Joe emptied his own rack Parlen called to him in a careless tone:

"Kinked my arm, but trot along. I'll overhaul you before you reach the meadows."

"I may's well help you clean up, Parl."

"No, go on."

Joe whooped at his broncho team and jolted off at a brisk trot. But around the turn of the first hill, nearly a mile away, he hitched the team to a cedar and climbed the slope. Peering over the crest ledges, he saw Parlen come from the ranch kitchen and go around the corner of the house. Black smoke was pouring from the chimney.

To keep under cover Joe had to circle around the hill and follow the windings of the creek gulley that ran past the corrals. Though hurried enough to keep in a jog all the way, he did not wish to show himself until sure of what his cousin was doing. He worked down the creek to the junction of the ranch spring-rill and up through the willow thickets of the rill gulley.

As he paused behind the spring house he again saw his cousin come from the kitchen. In one hand Parlen carried an iron rod that ended in a white-glow-

ing twist of metal. He went around the corner towards the dog kennel.

Joe sprinted for the kitchen. The wide ells of the old ranch building shut off all view of the road to town, and the muffled snarls that came from around the corner of the kitchen drowned all other sounds. Fast as Joe ran, he was a long second too late. Three strides short of the house corner his ears rang with the yell of the tortured wolf.

He whirled around the corner and sprang to hurl his cousin away from the writhing hog-tied victim. Taken by surprise, Parlen reeled and tottered. But he did not quite topple over, and he clung fast to the long-handled branding-iron. Sight of the fiery brand on the shoulder of the she-wolf and the rank smell of burnt hair and skin had maddened him out of his usual cautious restraint. As he recovered his balance he turned upon Joe and lunged with the red-hot brand-head.

Joe dodged, leaped in, and grasped the rod handle. But hard as he wrenched, Parlen clung fast to the iron. He was heavier and stronger than Joe, and for once he was in a fighting temper.

They scuffled and wrestled with all their skill and strength, each striving to wrest the branding-iron from the other. Neither dared let go to strike with his fist, for fear the other would get the iron. A blow with its hot end would have burned, perhaps maimed.

Parlen was first to think of his boots. He gave a vicious kick. His boot toe grazed Joe's kneecap.




At his second kick his shin smashed against Joe's deftly interposed boot heel.

Atop the luckless fighter's curse of pain and rage dropped the acrid voice of Kiowa Orton:

"Hey, bust loose, you bobcats. Men use guns."

Astounded, yet each still clinging fast to the handle rod, the cousins stared up over their shoulders. They had been far too excited to see the team and chuck-wagon come around the far ell of the ranch-house.

Mary's amazed eyes glanced past the transfixed cousins. She saw the hog-tied she-wolf snarling and snapping at the livid burn of the  that had bitten deep into her shoulder. With a cry of horror, the girl leaped to the ground and ran to confront Joe. Her gentle eyes flared at him with scorn and loathing.

"You cruel mean coward!" she panted. "Go away—go away quick! No, don't you try to make excuses. I hate and despise you! I won't listen—not to a single word! You've proved what you are, you cowardly bully!"

Even more than the furiously passionate words, her look scorched Joe's very soul. Her previous unfairness had been nothing to this unbearable injustice.

His own foolish pride had permitted her to remain in the mistaken belief that he had wished to torture the she-wolf. But he was too hard-stricken to make allowance for this. Without pausing to ask a single

question, she had blamed him for what he had tried to prevent Parlen from doing. She burned him with her scorn worse than the iron had burned the wolf—and she refused to let him speak a word in self-defense.

He was not angry at her. He could not be. She was Mary. But she had so wounded his love for her that he could not have said a word even if she had begged him to speak. He let go the branding-iron and silently walked away toward the horse corral.

“Hold on,” ordered Kiowa. “Help unload the wagon.”

He neither turned back nor gave any sign that he heard her. Mary stood staring after him, still too nearly beside herself to realize what she had done. A sharper yelp from the struggling wolf broke the spell. She ran into the house for her salve.

Kiowa shifted her hawk gaze to Parlen. He permitted himself a cautious half smile. Her eyes narrowed.

“I savvy. Sort of what you might call a double branding. Come 'round and help unload.”

Without a backward glance, Joe kept on to the horse corral. He roped and saddled his mare and rode to the bunk-house. There he lashed his bed-roll on behind the saddle.

When he came back to the house Parlen had gone into the kitchen with an armful of provisions. Kiowa looked up from the side of bacon she was dragging out of the wagon.

“Hitting out, are you?” she jeered. “Come to

get your time? You'll have to take a check for it."

She went into the kitchen. Joe tied his mare to the wagon and went around the corner, with a rolled gunnysack in his hand. The she-wolf had been freed from Parlen's hogging-strings, but was standing still while Mary daubed the brand burn with salve. As Joe came in sight the beast's rumbling growl burst into a snarl. She leaped past the kneeling girl to strain at her chain in a savage fury.

Joe unrolled his gunnysack and came up close to the raging beast. Before Mary realized what he was about, he had the gunnysack over the wolf's head and her body between his knees. Hard as the captive struggled, she could not escape the iron grip of the knees that had held fast to many a hard-bucking broncho. Out came Joe's old jack-knife.

"Oh-h!" gasped Mary. "Wh-what are you going to do?"

"If you want to know," said Joe, with the grimace that was so like his grin, "I'm going to turn my wolf loose."

The girl was far too wrought up to take the remark literally. It meant to her only a brutal taunt that he was about to unleash all the cruelty and evil of his nature.

"Stop!" she cried. "If you dare——"

She sprang up to run at the torturer. Joe's knife was already ripping through the sackcloth on the she-wolf's neck. He stepped around, flung the captive on her side, and backed off. The wolf was on her feet again with the quickness of a cat. But,



confused by her fall and the blinding sack, she rushed aslant past Mary.

When she came to the end of her chain, the violent sideward jerk flung her body around like the lash of a cracking whip. There was a sound of torn cloth, a frantic pawing by the she-wolf at her head, and she bounded to her feet, free from both sack and chain.

She whirled to fix her rage-reddened eyes upon Joe. He drew his pistol and deliberately started to take aim. The she-wolf well knew the meaning of firearms, and she was no longer chained fast or clogged by a trap. Craft overcame her rage. She leaped sideways and bounded from sight around the front of the house.

“Go get your wolf yourself this time,” Joe invited the wonder-struck girl. “I’m through.”

He headed back for his mare. His disappearance loosed Mary’s rigid limbs. She ran to snatch up the chain and collar. The collar had not broken. It had been cut almost clean through by the knife blade.

For many moments the girl stood staring at the cut strap in a daze of doubt and perplexity. Joe had not hurt the wolf again—he had set her free. Yet why—why? Had he at last grown ashamed of his cruelty? Had he become sorry for the tormented captive? If he had, he was not so heartless as she had believed. She would go and take back part of what she had said.

She hurried around to the rear of the kitchen. Joe was already past the spring-house and spurring

his mare from a lope into a run. She tried to call to him, but her voice went suddenly weak. She could not cry out. All she could do was stand there and watch him gallop away along the old round-up road that led past the hay meadows and off south over the divide.

## CHAPTER VI

### POISON

**K**IOWA was still at the table, figuring what she owed Joe, when Parlen tiptoed back from the door.

“No need for you to bother,” he whispered.  
“We’re rid of him.”

“How’s that?”

“He’s hitting the high places. Must have had another set-to with Mary. She’s got him going south—and she’s out there watching to see he keeps going.”

The old woman closed her smudged little account book.

“Too sudden to wait for his pay, is he? Well, he can wait now till he comes for it. I won’t send it after him. Suits me. Way Mackay shied that note——”

Kiowa caught the intent look in the young man’s face and alertly sought to cover the slip.

“Not that it matters a hill of beans. I can get along with you and Rucker till the round-up. That’ll save one man’s wages, and Mackay will wait till I have marketed my steers. He’s got to. With any kind of a beef market, I can take up the note and buy feed to help carry over the winter.”



"Count on me to boost things all I can, Aunt Ki. I'll do a lot to get Mary."

"That's talking, son. Side me, and I side you. Now's your chance to put your rope on her. But mind you don't try any busting. Gentle her. She looks soft as a kitten, but you saw the way she scratched Joe. She's my granddaughter all right, even if she does mostly purr and——"

The girl came in through the sun-flooded doorway, her eyes still clouded with perplexity.

"He's gone," she said. "Only first he cut her collar—he turned her loose."

"Her,—what?" demanded Kiowa.

"My wolf. He cut her collar. She's run off."

"Lord A'mighty!" Kiowa came to her feet, her black hawk eyes glittering, her withered lips twitching. "Turned that she-devil loose, did he, to butcher more of my stock? I'll pay him out for it. I'll——"

Mary burst into a shrill tremulous laugh.

"Why shouldn't he, Gran'ma? She was his wolf, wasn't she? You never paid him for her. And I—I turned *my* wolf loose on him!"

Into the girl's eyes gushed tears of grief and remorse. She ran into her bedroom. Her grandmother looked hard at Parlen.

"You didn't make your play with the iron any too soon. Go after her, but go slow and easy. As for him, keep your mouth shut mostly. When you say anything a-tall, make it sort of sad and regretful. Savvy?"

Parlen knew more about women than Joe. He was quite willing to follow the advice of the girl's shrewd old grandmother.

In the days that followed he worked hard enough almost to make up for the absence of his cousin. The restraining of his feelings for Mary made all the more effective his constant display of sympathy and devotion. On the one occasion that she spoke of her perplexity over Joe's behavior, he pulled a long face and shook his head.

"We oughtn't to blame him too much, Mary. Things like that seem to run in the blood. Young as I was, I can remember his dad grinning the same way when he used a branding-iron—Excuse me! I didn't mean to speak of that."

A week later Mary favored him with a confession.

"Perhaps, if you're willing to wait, Parlen, I may grow to like you as much as you deserve. But why do you bother about me? There are the Avery and Goodmorrow girls, and ever so many in town—girls who've been to Denver and boarding-school and are far better looking than I am."

"Not to my way of thinking," he replied.

Mary colored and parried.

"But the Seven Up is all run down, and they would bring you shares in big outfits. That ought to count with you."

"It does. If you knew how much, you might begin to realize how much more *you* count with me. I'm on the make, and not ashamed to own it. But I've got to have you, Mary. I can't live without you."

Quietly as the young man spoke, his voice shook with passion. Mary sensed the fierce intensity of his feelings and shrank with alarm.

He was still working to recover the ground lost by this mistake when the lonesome ranch had a visitor. Limpy Smith rode in at sun-down of a blistering hot day. Throughout supper he eyed Mary's shyly reserved face and swapped remarks with "Aunt Ki" on range conditions—at such intervals as he could get words past his inshoveled food. Mary's cooking was a dream to anyone who had to put up with the Circle B feed.

Not until he had gorged his fill and bitten off a big "chaw" of Navy plug did the visitor mention the errand that had brought him to the Seven Up. He grunted abruptly at Parlen:

"Boss's sick a-bed. Wants to see you."

"Me?"

"You done said it."

"Why?"

"Search me."

"By the way, I heard in town that Joe is back at home."

"Two men quit. Boss offered the kid half wages." Limpy shot a searching glance at Mary. "Kid took it. Acts sort of like he'd been rode to a finish. All the ginger took out of him by someun. Don't appear to care a damn 'bout nothing. Boss's sore at him. Kid just stands and takes the scratching like a busted cayuse."

Kiowa silenced Parlen with a warning glance. She,



not he, was the one to put the question.

“It’s too bad! That’s just the way his pa got to acting ’fore he — But, say, ’tain’t true, is it, this talk in town ’bout the boy taking to drink?”

“Thay’s a heap too many lies leaking ’round these parts,” was all the old buckaroo deigned to reply to the question.

Parlen managed a look of relief that scored him a white mark with Mary. After he led the limping visitor out to the bunk-house Kiowa got in another stroke. She spoke in an irritable mutter, as if thinking aloud.

“Why shouldn’t he have said so straight out, if that talk ain’t true? Where there’s smoke there’s bound to be some fire. Mebbe, though, the boy only took a nip, and they’re making a barrel of it. One in’cent little nip. Still, that was how his pa started.”

The hint of sympathy in the usually tart voice disarmed Mary. The poisoned dart pierced deep, to fester with those that had gone before.

She was up in the morning even earlier than usual, and gave Parlen and the visitor an extra good dawn breakfast. Limpy took a second helping of everything. When he could cram down no more, he mumbled to the scarlet-cheeked cook:

“Told the kid to play his luck. He’s no quitter. Someun must ’a’ stacked the cards on him.”

Kiowa’s eyes glitter.

“I ain’t saying he’s a quitter. It’s a free country. He had a right to leave if he wanted. What riles me is him turning loose that she-devil. Can’t say

how many head she's pulled down since."

"Let's try and forget it, Aunt Ki," urged Parlen. "After all, Joe is still pretty young."

He took Mary's hand in a gentle clasp.

"Good-bye. I'm coming back fast as I can. You know why."

She gave him a somewhat forced smile. Limpy edged between them.

"You — uh — Miss Mary, you ain't got no word to send to the kid, have you?"

"Only that I hope he will do well — with his uncle."

The old top-rider limped out into the red dawn, visibly depressed by the calm answer.

On the fourth evening Parlen returned from his visit to the Circle B. He told that his uncle had been poisoned by eating a spoiled can of cheap corn. Liberal doses of moonshine had barely pulled him through. Joe, it seemed, had known where to get a jug.

Their uncle had expected to die, and had sent for his older nephew to take charge of the ranch. He always had thought Joe too unsteady for the job; and now the kid had lost all his get-up-and-get, as well.

"But the day after I came, Uncle Lor was well enough to sit up," Parlen went on to explain. "So of course I hurried back. No need to tell you why, Mary."

"You're none too soon," put in Kiowa. "That devilish Splay Foot has had the gall to prowl close

in every night since you left. She actually came in sight of Mary yesterday sun-down."

"But she's killed only one calf near the ranch," said Mary. "I really think the poor thing wants to see me."

Kiowa chuckled at the joke.

"See *you!* It's dollars to doughnuts she came down from the hills gluttoned, filled up extra full on the calf, and got scared off 'fore she went hungry again. Wait till she takes a new mate. She'll begin slaughtering then just for fun. And in the spring there'll be another litter of pups to train. Lord! I could wring that fool boy's neck!"

"Here's hoping I get her first," said Parlen. He held up a little drum-shaped metal tube, somewhat larger than the muzzle of a rifle. "Look. I borrowed Joe's Maxim silencer. With smokeless powder, and this to muffle the shot, Splay Foot will not know where the bullets are coming from, if I manage to get in sight of her. She's just as apt as not to head straight for me."

Kiowa permitted herself a gleam of hope.

"Mebbe, after all, there's something in what Mary says. You lay in wait mornings and evenings while she does the chores. Whether it's her or the calves that she-devil's hankering for, it'll be all the same if she shows herself."

"But it won't, Gran'ma," protested Mary. "Don't you see? I know the poor thing must be killed. But if she should show herself because she wanted to come to me, I'd never forgive myself. It would



be like betraying a child that trusted in my protection."

To both her grandmother and Parlen this was a fantastic absurdity. A wolf was a wolf, and Splay Foot had already proved herself the biggest and craftiest and most murderous of wolves since the prime of her mother, Gotch Ear. But even Kiowa said nothing. She knew her granddaughter. As Joe had learned to his bitter cost, when the girl took a stand on what she considered a matter of right and wrong, nothing could budge her judgment.

Parlen pretended to agree with her, as he fitted the silencer on his carefully oiled rifle.

He lay out three nights on the roofs of the feed sheds. But the she-wolf either scented the lurker, or else she had seen him ride back from the south and decided that the ranch was too unsafe for her. When he found no more cattle killed close in, Parlen set out to hunt down the wily beast.

Joe had told him about her run and how he had planted his traps. He had left the traps in the bunk-house. Parlen found the run and set the traps with what he considered great skill and care. Splay Foot dug them out and sprung them, one after another. She even dragged three of them together, in unmistakable wolfish derision of the trapper.

Parlen next tried poisoned bait. It killed a few coyotes. Splay Foot passed by tallow balls and the freshest of meat. As before her capture, she ate only of her own kills, and of them no more than a single meal each.

But one moonlit night Parlen glimpsed the great beast slinking over a ridge crest. His hastily aimed bullet grazed her flank. She took the hint and drifted south, over the divide, to her old run on the Circle B range.

When Kiowa heard that the she-wolf was slaughtering Taylor Brent's stock, she promptly credited Parlen with seventy-five dollars. This was the reward she had pledged to him and Joe, if either should drive the daughter of Gotch Ear back to the range of the man she hated.

Parlen asked for a cash payment. But Kiowa was nursing her slim bank account. He then offered to take her note for the amount and for his now overdue wages. She cannily refused to give her note, but promised him interest on his money if Splay Foot did not come back. When he still argued that he should have the note, she quashed him with an acrid taunt:

"Don't forget Mary. You ain't got her roped yet, much less branded."

Parlen "gave in," but he did not forget to score a black mark against Kiowa Orton. She had outplayed him.

## CHAPTER VII

### AN OVER-REACH

THE chance visitor who had brought the news of Splay Foot's ravages on the Circle B was soon followed by the owner of that brand.

Parlen and Rucker were stacking the last load of the short crop of hay, and Mary was helping her grandmother do the evening chores, when two riders jogged into sight on the round-up road. Kiowa stared, unblinking, into the sunset glare.

"Cusses and calamity," she muttered. "That's Lor Brent."

"And Joe," murmured Mary. "I'll go get supper."

Her grandmother's frown deepened into a scowl as she glanced around at the hurrying girl. If Mary was so flustered by the mere sight of the boy, there was no telling what might happen.

The bright hawk eyes of the old woman stared with a hostile glint as the riders rode up. Brent sat his saddle as hard and unbending as a stone image. Joe slouched loose, his face a-grin with poorly acted indifference. The laws of hospitality forced upon Kiowa a show of cordiality.

"Howdy. 'Light and stable your hosses. Mary's gone to hustle chuck."

Brent was already heading his tired horse towards



the barn. Joe turned after him, with a dejected mumble:

"Looks like she thought I was bringing both my wolves."

"One's 'nough," snapped Kiowa, her glance darting past him to the stiff back of his uncle.

A little later she walked to the house with Brent. Joe had replied to the hearty hail of Parlen with a careless hand flip. He loitered on the way to the house. His uncle spent some time at the wash-bench outside the door, making a thick lather of suds. He was not paying for the soap. Joe dallied still longer with soap and water and comb before going in.

His uncle and Kiowa were seated at the far end of the big livingroom-kitchen, talking about the prospective beef market. Mary stood at the stove, busy with her pots and pans. Her high color was easily accounted for by the heat. She gave Joe a calm nod of welcome and pointed to the others.

"You've had a hot ride," she said. "It's cool by the window."

Under his show of indifference Joe's nerves were raw. In Mary's calmness he saw only cold contempt.

"It's a sight too chilly here by the fire," he gibed, and he went to fling himself into a chair behind his uncle.

Before long Parlen came in to wish his uncle a quiet good-day and to offer Joe his hand. Joe did not appear to see it. Their uncle fixed his hard gaze on Parlen.

"What's this Aunt Ki tells me about paying you

seventy-five dollars to run that splay-footed she-wolf onto my range?"

"Not to run her onto the Circle B, but off the Seven Up," Parlen carefully explained. "I managed only to scratch her, and she happened to head south. You know I would have killed her if I could. Aunt Ki has a hundred up for her scalp."

Brent's eyes became a trifle less stony.

"Twenty-five dollars more. Yes, you would have killed her."

"Well, I'm the seventy-five ahead, Uncle Lor, and I'll collect the hundred if Joe doesn't beat me to it. I guess if he gets another chance at the murdering devil he'll not bring her in alive and then turn her loose again."

Brent's eyes went glassy.

"Since you — since I heard that, I have been charging off his wages as part damages for the cows she is killing."

Kiowa chuckled.

"If Splay Foot ain't stopped *pronto*, the boy'll be working it off till he dies of old age. Why don't you put up another hundred and send him out to get her?"

"He'll go without the money," said Brent. "I brought him along to get his traps — as well as to witness for me."

The last words made Kiowa prick up her ears. But range manners did not permit the questioning of a guest. If Brent had intended to say anything more about his business, Mary's call to supper in-

interrupted him. Throughout the meal he had no word of praise for the cook. But as she knew him to be an indifferent eater, the manner in which he cleared his plate was high praise for her skill.

Her pleasure over this was quite spoiled by Joe. He had always been blessed with a hearty appetite. Now he hardly touched his food. His face showed never a glimmer of its old-time cheerful grin. She was unable to stifle her pity for him. Even his sulky glumness could not keep her resentful over his harsh discourtesy before supper.

He had been suffering. He still was suffering. Given the chance she might have managed to cast a line across the gulf of misunderstanding that separated them. The chance was not given.

Taylor Brent had come on business. He never went anywhere except on business. Having eaten his fill of Kiowa Orton's food, without pay, he proceeded to talk business. Out came his worn old bill-folder.

"I bought your note from Mackay," he said. "It is over-due. I want my money."

Kiowa blinked and rallied.

"Just like Mackay to back the top dog. Put you next that I was in a hole, did he?"

"No."

"He didn't? Then who was it blabbed to you 'bout my private concerns?" The old woman fixed her hate-reddened eyes on Joe. "Who was the drunken blabber?"

Joe looked for his uncle to clear him. Brent



coldly ignored the appealing glance. He took the promissory note from his bill-folder.

"How I learned about this is neither here nor there, Mrs. Orton. What I wish to know is how soon you can pay it."

"After the round-up, when I market my beef steers."

"Too long to wait. The note is already a week over-due. I want my money now."

"Whistle," jeered Kiowa. "Even you can't squeeze blood out of a turnip."

Brent looked at a figure-covered slip of paper.

"If you cannot pay in cash, I will take over your school land leases, and call it square."

"Sure you'd call it square. I'd call it crooked. Them hay meadow leases are worth double that note, and you know it. Tell you what I'll do. I'll pay you in steers, at the market. Take 'em, or wait for your money—or sue, if you like. I'll law you to the limit."

The challenge failed to strike fire on Brent's icy flint. He was too close-fisted to pay a lawyer and court costs, when he could attain his ends by a little more waiting. Old Kiowa was short of hay for the winter feeding. She would have to borrow again. Still another way to gather in the Seven Up had been suggested to him.

Meantime the steer offer promised a double profit. He had learned that Mackay's bank was in a tight fix from too many frozen loans. The banker had sold him Kiowa's unsecured note at a heavy discount.

On the other hand, the beef market was very low. He knew he could profitably hold a bunch of Seven Up steers for a rise.

He held out the little weekly newspaper published at the cow-town.

"I'll take your beef at Saturday's market."

Kiowa looked at the quotations—and blinked. They were a cent under the already low prices of the week before. But Brent had called her bluff.

"It's a go," she said quickly. "Parl, show your uncle to a good bunk. Sooner we hit the hay the better."

Joe led the way out, keeping his eyes downcast. He failed to see the pitying gaze of Mary. Night only deepened his despair. He was sure now that he had lost all his chances. Mary had not relented. At daybreak, unable to endure the sight of what he had lost, he asked Parlen to bring a cold snack to him out at the corrals.

Parlen lost nothing with Mary by the sympathetic tone in which he said that he guessed poor Joe did not feel much like facing Aunt Ki after what had come out about the note.

Most of the Seven Up cattle were up in the hills. But by noon Kiowa, Rucker and the cousins had driven in enough steers from the lower range to more than pay the note. The real struggle came when Brent and Kiowa began to haggle over the weight of the animals. Kiowa claimed they were all in prime condition. Brent insisted that fully half were runts. The contest did not end until Kiowa

vowed she would be allowed her estimate, or the deal was off.

After this came the branding. Mary had taken no part in the little round-up. But she came out to the cattle corral while the selected steers were being worked through the chute. The rule for Brent's riders was never to go out without a saddle-iron, in case of meeting a maverick. Even Brent himself always had a short iron on his saddle. He would not unbend to do ordinary range work, but a maverick was so much money found. There was ever a possibility of running upon one when riding out alone to spy on his men.

He had now turned his iron over to Parlen. But Parlen had chosen the task of manning the cross bars of the chute. This threw the actual branding upon Joe. He set about the hated task with expert swiftness, never once delaying the work of the others. While they freed each branded steer and penned another between the bars, he scorched his face at the fire, heating the branding-irons. A white-hot iron burns less painfully than one only red-hot.

When Mary came around the corral to the chute she saw the set grimace on Joe's face. She stopped short, repulsed again by his seeming enjoyment of what he was doing. Then she noticed how white he was keeping the irons, regardless of scorched fingers. She drew nearer. He was so intent upon his work that he did not see her.

She watched his face. The closer she looked, the more certainly the truth forced itself upon her. Joe



was not grinning. Each time the iron smoked on a steer's flank he wrinkled his eyes and screwed up his mouth. It looked like a grin, but it was not.

Kiowa saw the changed look in Mary's eyes. There could be no doubt that the girl had begun to catch on. Once aware of how Joe had been maligned, she would swing to the other extreme. Quick action was needed.

"My, my! You sure can handle a saddle-iron, boy," she called out in derisive praise. "Looks like you been having a sight of practice lately. Hope it wasn't on *my* calves."

Joe pretended not to hear this. The old woman went on relentlessly:

"Well, I guess it sort of comes natural. Like father, like son, they say. Though, come to think, your pa managed to dodge the vigilantes, and nobody actually proved his brand-blotting on him—in court."

Too much was enough. Joe stopped work to look at his uncle.

"You know my father was square and white, Uncle Lor. You can prove it. I can't. Tell this lady she's a liar."

Taylor Brent looked over his nephew's head at the sun.

"Go on with your work," he ordered. "We'll have a late start as it is."

Joe dropped the branding-iron and went over to his waiting mare. He rode off as if he were all alone, miles out in the hills.

"Heighty-tighty!" mocked Kiowa. "If that ain't just like his pa to a T. 'Member, Lor, whenever Sam got caught in something crooked, he used to bluff he didn't care a bean."

"The young whelp has grown so worthless that a quirting would be a waste of good leather," said Brent. "I'll make him get that splay-foot wolf of yours. After that he shall shift for himself. I'm done with him."

"What could you expect? Like father, like son," repeated Kiowa. "Take the irons, Rocker."

Mary drew back around the corral and returned to the house — wondering, doubting, heavy with grief and remorse. If Joe were going the way of his father, had it not been she who had started him on the downward trail?

Brent had gone around with Kiowa to help drive the unbranded steers into the chute.

"Can't trail the bunch alone," he said. "That young fool is locoed. He'll keep headed for home, once he's started. I'll need his cousin."

For once Kiowa did not haggle with her enemy. She knew he would not turn over her note until all the steers had been branded and delivered. She could afford to loan Parlen to him for the drive. Keen judge of beef on the hoof as was the owner of the Circle B, she was still keener. She knew that the steers weighed under her estimate.

## CHAPTER VIII

### FIRE

**P**ARLEN was so hurried away by his uncle that he had no time to take leave of Mary.

He returned from the Circle B confident that he now had only to tell the girl to set the day. She had already shown how little use she had for Joe. Joe was on the skids, whereas he was on the make. Mary had as much as admitted that she liked him. All he had to do, now that Joe was clean out of the running, was to go in and take her.

To his vast surprise, she greeted him with a reserve that bordered on coldness. It was like the barrier that she had raised between herself and Joe. He was no less astonished than outraged. The cases were altogether different. Joe had proved himself a worthless, loose-finger fool. He, Parlen Brent, already had money in bank. Also, he had driven a close bargain with his uncle in regard to a certain confidential deal. One of the considerations was a new will.

Cautious as was his nature, his resentment over the change in Mary would have goaded him into harsh scoldings. But old Kiowa's tongue could smooth down as well as rasp.

"Don't you mind the girl acting upetty, Parl," she interposed. "It's on you, anyhow. You went



off without saying good-bye to her. She's been off her feed ever since."

"Why, Gran'ma," cried Mary. "I—I've not. It wasn't that at all. It's only ——"

She burst into tears and dodged past Parlen's out-reaching arms to run and hide herself in her bedroom.

Her grandmother eyed the disappointed suitor scornfully.

"Thought you had more hoss-sense. You ought to know girls are kittle cattle. You come mighty nigh spilling yourself. I told you to gentle her, and here you started in to file your spur rowels."

"She didn't even give me a handshake," complained Parlen. "I might have been any stray buckaroo drifting in from God-knows-where, like Mex Chavez and Hooch Huggins."

"Huh! I been wishing your uncle joy of that pair of misbegotten brand-blotters ever since he rid me of 'em. Here's hoping they rustle a bunch of his prime steers!"

Parlen was not to be side-tracked.

"We're talking about Mary."

"Do tell! Well, my say-so is you'll be wise if you keep your spurs clean off your boots, dealing with her. If you want to know what's ailing her, it's Joe. Seems she caught on that his grin when he's branding ain't exactly a sign of rejoicing."

"But how could that make any difference? She knows he's done for. It's not alone his fool indifference to money. He has quit cold. Used to risk his

neck to lead the bunch. Now he's become a tailender drag. She must have seen it herself."

Kiowa gazed out at the summer-seared grass and dried stalks of flowers long since withered and fallen.

"Wimmen — some of 'em — are funny fools. I stood thirty years of Hell-roaring Jake Orton. Dunno as Mary'll stay hitched 'fyou turn out mean as your uncle. She's mighty dutiful. So mebbe, once you get her roped and branded — Just now, though, she's feeling sorry for Joe, 'cause she thinks she didn't treat him fair. 'Fyou try to bust her you'll get throwed hard."

"Joe! After all his bad acting?"

"Don't fash yourself 'bout him any. My guess is she's only sort of sorry for him and sore at herself. Go to knocking him, and she'll think she thinks a heap of him. All you got to do is ride with a loose rein and give him plenty of rope. He'll hang himself, see if he don't."

Parlen felt in his pocket.

"Why didn't I think to give him back his Maxim silencer? Remember, Uncle Lor said he'd make him go get Splay Foot, then would fire him."

"Didn't I tell you? Soon's he's kicked out, he'll drift off like his pa done. 'Fore he drifts back, you'll have Mary. Only you've got to go slow and gentle her."

The innate caution and calculation of Parlen's nature forced him to agree to this sound reasoning. When he met Mary the next morning he had assumed

a forgiving, mildly appealing manner that gave her nothing to resist. As a result, she herself soon began to take down the barrier that she had raised. Within a few days she was, to all appearances, as frank and friendly as before Joe's disturbing visit.

Kiowa kept on urging the now impatient lover to go slow. He was conceited enough, however, to mistake Mary's normal friendliness for encouragement. Under his habitual calm and almost wooden look and manner, he was a molten volcano of desire.

One morning, after breakfast, Kiowa stepped out after Rucker to change an order. Mary brought Parlen the last panful of flapjacks. He caught hold of her hand. She smilingly sought to draw it from his clasp.

He sprang up and seized her in his arms. For a moment she lay on his breast, so astonished that she could not move. He showered kisses on her half-parted lips, on her wide-gazing bewildered eyes. It was as if he had burned her with a branding-iron. She struggled to free herself. He held fast. His eyes were flaming with love—a devouring, rapacious, wolfish love.

Unable to break loose from him, she cried out. Her grandmother darted into the dim-lit kitchen, as aggressively alert as a wildcat.

“Hey? What's this?” she demanded. “Leave her go, Parl.”

“I'll not,” he half shouted. “I've got her. She's mine. I'm going to keep her.”

“You are, are you? What say, girl?”



Mary had clasped her hands over her face to shut out the sight of those wolfish eyes.

"No-no-no!" she gasped. "Oh, Gran'ma — Gran'ma!"

The old woman stepped over to the deer antlers from which hung her ancient belt and Colts. She spoke in a hushed tone that was far more menacing than loud-mouthed curses.

"Asking for it, are you, buster?"

Though fairly beside himself with passion, Parlen could still hear and see and understand. He shoved Mary out from him. But he did not let go his hold. He held her at arm's-length between him and her grim-eyed grandmother.

"Uh!" grunted Kiowa. "That's more like. Now you leggo. I ain't going to drill you, 'fyou don't get funny again. Leggo and 'pologize for behaving that way."

Assured of safety, Parlen released his living shield. He took on an air of injured innocence.

"What've I done, I'd like to know? You act as if I'd committed murder. Yet all this time you've been backing me to win, and she herself — she's been leading me on."

"Oh, no — no, I never, Gran'ma. He's always seemed friendly to me, so I tried to like him. But I never, never gave him leave to ki-kiss me!"

Kiowa nodded towards the door.

"Told you not to try any busting. You've went and done it. You're spilled."

Parlen's face went white with cold anger. His

eyes became glassy like his uncle's.

"She's mine. She's going to be my wife. You're going to make her. I'll make you make her."

"As how?"

The dryness of the query failed to warn the threatener.

"Wait and see. For one thing, you can't pay what you owe me. For another thing, I——"

Caution jerked him to a sudden check.

"Go on. I'm listening," invited Kiowa. "Uh—— run out of gall, have you? 'Fraid to make a bluff. Well, here's me to you. Just you clean out of here *muy pronto*. Vamoose! You're fired. Go roll your blankets."

"My money. You owe me——"

"Your check'll be waiting soon's you're saddled-up. Git!"

Once more overcome by a volcanic upheaval of passion, Parlen forgot all caution and stepped towards Mary. He had never been nearer to quick death. Kiowa's left hand dropped on the hilt of her Colts. Not an instant too soon, Parlen stopped short, stricken by the look of horror in Mary's eyes. He turned and went heavily out into the glare of sunrise.

Mary sank into a chair and dropped forward on the table to hide her white face in her arms. She had always thought of Parlen as a very mild, not unpleasant edition of his uncle. His keenness over money had seemed a matter-of-course. Of all the men she knew, he was one of the last she would have

imagined looking at her with that wolfish gloating.

For a time the only sound in the room was the scratch of Kiowa's rusty pen. As she tore the check from its stub she pursed her lips at the downbent golden head.

"Don't you fret, girl," she said. "I figgered I could use him to buck his uncle. But I don't blame you a mite. If he'd gentled you, 'twould 'a' showed he wasn't all Brent. As 'tis, we're in luck to be shut of the whole bunch. Good riddance, I say."

At the thud of hoofs coming from the bunk-house, she went out with the check. No kin of Taylor Brent should again darken her door.

For a few days there was little to do on the Seven Up. Kiowa made no move to hire new riders. Every day's delay meant so much saving of wages. She was still waiting when her former hands, Mex Chavez and lanky, red-nosed Hooch Huggins, came jogging from over the divide.

Old Kiowa was as little fearful of the unsavory pair as she would have been of two rattlesnakes. They rode meekly around to where she and Mary were helping Rucker mend the feed-corral fence. The Mexican's beady black eyes glanced everywhere except at his former *señora* boss. Hooch looked down his nose.

"Howdy," he ventured.

"Huh," grunted Kiowa. "You can trot right back and tell Lor Brent he can keep his coyotes to home."

"Like to oblige, ma'am, only can't be did," apolo-



gized Hooch. "He done fired us."

"Can't say I blame him."

"No'um. Don't my ownself—nor Mex. He don't need us now, with both his nevvys back—on half wages. Me and Mex was going to quit, anyhow. The joke sure was on us. 'Fyou don't mine me saying it, ma'am, you're on'y cream tartar to his oil of vitriol. That's litter-chure. I got it out a book."

"Do tell!"

"Yes'um. And the hog-wash he calls chuck 'd sicken a buzzard. Me and Mex allowed we'd take a *pasear* over thisaway, case you might be wanting to take on a pair of A-one riders."

Kiowa had to have her gibe.

"Scum's one sort of top-rider. Mebbe I might put up with such while waiting for the real article."

The beady eyes of Chavez glinted furtively. But Hooch swallowed the insult as if it had been a choice bit of Mary's cooking.

"Thanky, Aunt Ki. Me and Mex knows now when we're well off. You can count on us to side you to the limit 'gainst that dirty, cold-blooded cuss t'other side the divide."

The venom with which this was spoken decided Kiowa.

"Never figgered on swapping you back from Lor Brent," she grumbled. "Might do worse, though. I got the short end of the bargain before. Even a pair of fourflusher badmen like you can't be worse 'n anybody that's blood-kin to him. You say Parl's

home on half wages. How 'bout worthless Joe? Still hunting Splay Foot?"

Hooch rolled his quid of tobacco, spat, and blurted in a distressed tone:

"I ain't got nothing 'gainst the kid. 'Tain't his fault he's got to tote a saddle-iron every time he goes out to get that blamed she-devil. He's working for his uncle—and you know Brent. All the same, me and Mex're Seven Up men now. Coming over the divide we seen more'n one calf with a fresh Circle B brand 'longside Seven Up cows."

The old woman's black eyes glittered.

"You did, did you? Well, your first orders are to get that rustler. It's fifty dollars for him dead."

"Oh!" cried Mary. "Oh, Gran'ma, please!"

"You're right," said Kiowa. "The young cuss ain't worth a red cent dead. I'll make it two hundred if you men get him alive, with legal proof he's rustling for Lor Brent."

"I savvy," said Hooch. "It's the old rustler you want to noose, not the kid. Just you leave it to us, Aunt Ki. Mex can track like a 'Pache. We'll catch the kid with his iron hot. He's mighty quick on the draw— But we won't hurt him a bit, Miss Mary, not if we can help. That two hundred looks good to us. We'll fetch him straight to your grammaw. If it's on'y his uncle she's after, she'll let the kid off—after he turns state ev'dence."

"Sure," agreed Kiowa. "Just let me once land Lor Brent in the pen, and I'll die happy. The boy don't amount to shucks, one way or t'other."

## CHAPTER IX

### THE RUSTLERS

**P**ROVISIONED by their new boss, Hooch and Mex headed back to the divide. On their way they turned aside to a hollow pine log for a cached saddle-iron.

On the divide, mid-morning of the next day, Hooch sat crouched between two boulders of a high bridge crest. The position gave him a long view in three directions. On the remaining side, the northwest, the crags, cedars and chaparral of the Yamparos brought thick cover within short pistol shot of the lier-in-wait. The watcher did not look that way. What rider would punish his horse by beating through the broken hills until compelled to do so by the work of the round-up?

Two days before Parlen had headed the sinister pair towards the Seven Up his uncle had sent Joe out towards the far southwest end of the Circle B range. From thence had come the latest reports of Splay Foot's killings. Hooch did not expect to see the boy for several days.

He was now on guard, while in the grassy draw below him Mex Chavez manufactured evidence. The materials were the Mexican's braided horsehair *reata*, a smokeless fire of dry wood, a saddle-iron and the calf of a Seven Up cow. Having finished the pleas-



ant task, Chavez rode down the draw in search of another calf. Up above him Hooch shifted along the ridge.

As they passed out of sight, Joe Gale broke cover from behind the nearest clump of chaparral and loped his mare down to the branded calf. He had tracked Splay Foot north into the Yamparos, lost all trace of her, and struck down out of the higher hills along the divide.

As he now came to the Seven Up cow he saw the raw burn of a Circle B on her calf. For several moments he sat limp in his saddle, staring vacant-eyed at the fresh brand. Suddenly his slack jaw clenched tight; his head went up; his back stiffened. He set spurs to his mare and loped away aslant the divide towards the old round-up road.

Some time later Chavez worked around into the valley north of the first ridge crossed by Joe. Hooch had been right in claiming that the Mexican was almost as good a tracker as an Apache. He saw and instantly recognized the hoofprints of Joe's mare.

Joe did not ride as hard as his trackers. But he had a long start. He was still well ahead when he reached the ranch.

As on the previous day, Kiowa and Mary were helping Rocker mend the corrals. They did not heed the approaching rider until he came loping around the cow corral and threw his mare on her haunches.

The half-witted Rocker let out a cackle of pleased laughter. He liked Joe. Mary straightened up, forgetful of all else than her eagerness to tell Joe how

sorry she felt for her unfairness to him. He looked past as if he did not see her, and fixed his contemptuous gaze on her grandmother.

"Chuck it," he said. "You've no call to reach for your gun. I've brought you no wolf this time — my own or anyone else's. Keep that hand away from your gun if you don't want the old has-been shot out of it."

Kiowa paused to consider. She might be able to beat the boy to the draw, and then, again, she might not. Through a slit in the corral rails she caught a glimpse of two riders racing around the hill, a mile away. If she could catch Joe off his guard before they arrived, she might save the two hundred dollars of the reward. But she was not fool enough to take too great a risk.

"What d'you mean, jumping on us like that?" she rasped. "Took you for one the rustler coyotes that've been misbranding my calves."

"Just what I dropped in to tell you about, Aunt Ki. Lost Splay Foot's trail up in the hills this morning. Working out, down the divide, I spotted your coyotes — Hooch Huggins and Mex Chavez — using a Circle B iron. The cow was a Seven Up. I made sure of it, then hit in to put you wise."

The old woman pretended to believe.

"Blood sure does tell. You've streaked it here to tattle on your own uncle. Willing to testify he's rustling my stock, are you?"

Joe reddened.

"I've about as much reason to love Uncle Lor as

you have. I was going to tell you something still worse. It would make you love him a lot more than any rustling. But I guess you want to wait and hear the happy news from him. About this rustling, I make no charges against him, and you'll not say I have. I've taken the trouble, though, to give you a tip over that brace of badmen he's hiring."

"He's still hiring them, is he? You'll swear they're still working for him?"

"I will not. They may have quit him, for all I know. I can and will swear to just one thing—which is, they branded one of your calves with the Circle B. Any more questions? If not, I'll jog along—after thanking you for your grateful appreciation of my putting you wise. It's in keeping with the way you've scratched me and lied about my father."

The mare swung around to the touch of the reins on the side of her neck.

"Stop!" ordered Kiowa. "I've got you covered. Put 'em up and get off."

Joe looked over his shoulder at the muzzle of the ancient Colts. His pain-furrowed face smoothed out in a quiet smile.

"Turn her loose, Aunt Ki. I'm ready. You and Mary and Uncle Lor, between you, have made life hell for me. All I'm asking is that you'll put the first shot where it'll do the most good."

He turned his head and back square upon the cow-woman and started his mare off at a walk. As Kiowa raised her old Colts, Mary cried out and ran



to fling herself before the muzzle. But there was no need. The revolver had already sagged down in her grandmother's shaking hand.

"The young devil!" choked out the exasperated old woman. "The young devil! He knows I can't shoot him in the back."

"Gran'—ma!" gasped Mary. "He's going away! Call him back! He's going away—with-out even speaking to me! Hurry! Hurry! he's beginning to lope!"

Kiowa gripped the arm of the breathlessly frantic girl in her bony fingers.

"Leave be," she muttered. "Hooch and Mex are laying for him up the road. They'll bring him in—alive. You can bet your boots they won't risk losing that two hundred."

The mare was already rounding the end of the feed sheds. Joe did not look back. He had heard Mary cry out, but it had been to her grandmother, not to him. She had stood there all the time without so much as a word to him. She believed him a cruel coward, and she had refused to let him defend himself or even attempt an explanation.

The ingratitude of Aunt Ki did not matter. If only he had been able to taunt the perverse old Tartar into shooting, that would have been a happy short-cut to the end of the trouble trail. Now he must drag along in the dust, hopeless of winning Mary and hopeless of life without her. What was the use of living?

His steadily loping mare swung around a turn of

the road past a screening thicket. Out of the tail of his eye he glimpsed the outflinging arms of Hooch and Mex. As he ducked, a touch of the rein spun his nimble mare around sideways towards the liers-in-wait. The lanky man's rope swished past. But the *reata* of the Mexican had been flung sooner. Its noose whipped down over Joe's head.

The horsehair rope drew taut. Had not the mare swerved so swiftly in at the thrower, her rider would have been jerked out of his saddle. As it was, he had time to draw. The bullet struck the backward tugging arm of Chavez. The Mexican yelled and dropped the *reata*.

Gone was all Joe's gloom. For the moment at least life was well worth living. He grinned.

"Howdy, old-timers. Quite a s'prise party. Is it not? Let's see you stretch. Just reach me down a star or two."

Chavez stifled his curses to whine.

"*Perdone, amigo*. You busta *meo* — *meo* arrum."

"That's all right, Greaserio. Only keep t'other one skyed. Now, Booze-nose, what's the game? Make mouth-noises like a little man. I crave for to hear your seraph voice."

"Aw, let up, kid," appealed Hooch. "Here we just wanted to have a leetle fun hazing you, and you go and get mad — bust my sidekick's arm. We own up the joke's on us. Le's call quits."

"Heap of fun if you'd spilled me! Come on, now. Trot out your next lie, if you don't want to reach town in a hog-tie."

"Tia Chi," groaned Chavez—"La señora——"

"Well?"

"He's trying to say, 'Aunt Ki,'" explained Hooch. "Your uncle let us out. She took us on. Remembers how well we rode for her before."

"What's that to do with your trying to rope me?"

"Honest, kid, we didn't aim to do you no harm. You got to own up we could've plunked you easy, 'stead of using our ropes."

"I'd as soon be shot as hanged."

"Lord, kid, we ain't ijits. Aunt Ki didn't offer a cent for you dead."

"Which means, she wanted me roped alive. What for?"

Hooch stared unblinkingly.

"I can't right say. On'y she's sore's your uncle 'bout you turning loose Splay Foot. My guess is she wants to put you on that there wolf chain and wear out a quirt or two on your hide."

The light went out of Joe's face. Aunt Ki was the kind to shoot, not to quirt an enemy. Mary had kept the ancient six-shooter from blazing loose. Mary believed he had tortured the she-wolf. Of course this scheme to take him alive and chain him up in place of Splay Foot was hers. She did not want him killed. Her wish was to see him degraded—chained to a dog kennel!

Bitter despair again seized him—sickened his spirit. If only Mary had let her grandmother shoot! But he was not going to weaken before this pair of sneaky coyotes. Without for an instant turning his



steady gaze from the rustlers, he jerked the loose end of the *reata* to him and started to back his mare.

"Always did covet your hair rope, Mex," he said. "*Muchas gracias* for the gift. Now, both you birds, trot for home and mother—No, keep'em skyed, and don't look back. 'Twon't be healthy."

The balked badmen rode around the thicket and jogged towards the feed sheds, Chavez swaying in his saddle. His wound was only through the flesh, but he had already lost enough blood to make him dizzy. Hooch wisely kept both hands high and his face to front.

Around the end of the sheds ran a golden-haired figure. Joe whirled his mare and loped away southward.

## CHAPTER X

### REBELLION

**T**AYLOR BRENT always ate with his men. This was not due to sociability on his part. Business required his presence. He had to make sure that neither his cook nor his punchers wasted any food.

He was seated at the supper table, in the dirty, smelly, lamp-lit kitchen, when Joe slouched through the open doorway, out of the darkening twilight. Parlen muttered something to his uncle. Brent turned to stare at the new arrival, his eyes at their stoniest.

Joe had not stopped to wash, nor even to brush the dust off his shirt and overalls. His hat was still on his head. Most offensive of all, he still had on his cartridge belt with the holstered pistol.

Brent's harsh demand fixed every eye upon his younger nephew:

"Where's that wolf scalp?"

"Taking a *pasear* in the Yamparos, at last accounts," drawled Joe.

"Enough of that, young man. I told you not to come back without the scalp of that she-devil."

"This is another kind of come-back," explained Joe. "Just stopped by to hand you my compliments."

“Run out of food, you mean. Been gluttonizing. I gave you enough rations for double this time.”

Joe's voice again drawled into banter:

“No, honest, Uncle Lor, I didn't get a chance to wolf the chuck. 'Twasn't my fault. What you gave me was too much alive. First night out the weevils and maggots took a mean 'vantage of me. They done et through the pack strings and run off with the better half of my rations. T'other half was so bad they had to pass it up.”

Brent's face went white.

“You lying whelp! You'll find your own food from now on.”

“Thanks — thanks awfully,” mocked Joe. “That lets me out of evil association with Beelzebub, Prince of Flies — and Maggots. *Muchas gracias, señor* — as the greaser member of your hired rustler pair would say.”

The owner of the Circle B half rose from his chair, for once stung out of his stony restraint.

“What's that? ‘Hired rustlers!’”

“Your charming pair of iron artists, Mex and Hooch.”

“Them?” Brent settled back into his chair. “I discharged both those scoundrels two days after you left.”

Joe grinned tauntingly and looked around the table at the interrupted eaters. He had never been in a more reckless mood.

“Howdy, boys,” he greeted as if he had just stepped in. “Watch out you don't take too big



bites, Swede. You'll get docked for excess feed — No, Curley; no plate for me, thanks. Didn't you hear the boss bar me from the trough? 'Lo, Limpy. Y'ought to've trailed with me. Ran into all kinds of sign — wolf, coyote and skunk."

With the last word Joe looked towards the head of the table.

"Yeah, I started to trail a lobo, and ran 'cross a pair of coyotes — which the same brought me in scenting distance of one or more skunks. How about it, Parl? Was it you or Uncle Lor, or both of you, that discharged Hooch and Mex, with orders to ride for the Seven Up but use a Circle B iron?"

Brent's rage burst the ice.

"You crazy liar! You're already out of my will. I'll tan your hide within an inch of your life, and kick you off my range!"

The furious cowman started to rush like a mad bull. Out flipped Joe's pistol.

"*Whoa!* Back up!" he warned. "So — that's wise. I'd just as lief pop a skunk as a rattler. You've no call to slaver — yet. I didn't call you anything. All I did was inquire. Why don't you answer? Gone dumb, have you? Refuse to incriminate yourself. Come to think, I asked Parl first. He hasn't told the interested assemblage if it was he or honest Taylor Brent who put Hooch and Mex up to rustling Aunt Ki's calves."

Parlen made a very effective show of indignant amazement.

"Me? Why should *I* want to hire any rustlers?"

“Think you can do your own stealing, do you? Well, that leaves it up to Uncle Lor.”

“Are you gone clean dotty, Joe? Uncle Lor isn’t crazy. He’d not risk playing into Aunt Ki’s hands. If that pair of coyotes are rustling, it’s all on their own hook.”

Joe fired his double charge of buckshot.

“Tell that to the jury—you and Uncle Lor. One or t’other of you goes to the pen—unless it’s both. Your hired men are using a Circle B iron. I went and tattled to Aunt Ki. But maybe you can run off or brand-blot all the mamas of the calves before the round-up.”

Brent’s eyes had again gone glassy. He spoke without a trace of emotion:

“You peddled this lie to Kiowa Orton?”

“She was almost as grateful as you. Called me the same pet name. That doesn’t take the Circle B off her calves. If only I’d known, I’d have been glad to tell her which of you two it was that hired the branders. That’s how much I love any so-called man who’ll rustle from a poor, lone, helpless old lady.”

The raillery goaded Parlen out of his cautious silence.

“You did the branding yourself—you, not Hooch and Mex. You did it to hit back at Uncle Lor for cutting you out of his will. You did it to throw suspicion of rustling on him. You thought folks would blame him, because he’s the only one who could profit by the use of his brand.”

Brent seized upon this logical explanation.

"So that's it. You slick rattler! Trying to incriminate me, eh? I'll not quirt you. I'll send you to the pen. Take him, boys."

"Easy, easy," advised Joe, his pistol swinging up. "First man makes a move, gets his. Better cancel that order, Uncle Lor. I'm feeling sort of careless. I'd just as lief as not cash in my chips. But if anybody starts the fireworks, I figure on getting you and Parl before I get mine."

The meanness of Brent had attracted to his employ several men no less mean than himself, but of the lickspittle variety. They hated Joe because he was not like themselves and because he was the under dog. To curry favor with their boss by beating or shooting the young man would have given them double pleasure. Only, like the others, they knew his quickness with a pistol, and they could see the reckless look in his eyes.

Old Limpy broke the deathlike hush that had fallen upon the room.

"Looks like your move, kid. You best hit out for Arizony. Thay's chances down thataway for a right smart rider — still real old-time open range in spots. Go on, now, kid. You don't want to hurt nobody — you know you don't."

"I'm not so sure," muttered Joe.

Yet the soothing voice of his old friend somehow quieted the torment of his despair. He was not alone in the world. At least one real friend had thought for his good . . . and it was true he did not wish to hurt anyone — at least not by shooting.



"All right, Limpy. I'll go," he said. "There's not room enough in the Yamparo country for me and the man who cheated my father, the man who's now scheming to ruin old Aunt Ki by buying her leased school hay land."

Brent stared.

"Who told you that?"

"Guess. There's only one, isn't there, who's apt to know about your sneaky schemes?"

With this parting trouble-maker for Parlen, Joe stepped backwards through the doorway and disappeared in the darkness.

For a long moment all continued to sit still. They had no means of knowing whether Joe had gone off or was lurking outside. The men began to mutter comments, and returned to the attack on their food.

Brent spoke stonily to Parlen:

"Come into the office."

Parlen took down a lantern and lighted his uncle through the inner doorway. The outer walls of the ranch-house were made of logs, but the inside was partitioned off with flimsy ceiling board. Some of the men were not above listening to the voices that came from Brent's bedroom-office. They heard only the unexcited murmuring of words too low-pitched to be made out by the keenest ears.

The quick eaters were leaving the table to go out to the bunk-house when Parlen came back and sat down to his unfinished supper. He dallied with his plum duff as if he had lost his appetite, but there was a cold smile on his lips.

"The stuff is sourer than ever," he muttered to slow-eating half-toothless Limpy. "Joe must have taken a look at it. Good thing you got him to go. He sure was aching to drill Uncle Lor. Can't say I blame him, after the way Uncle Lor left him out of the new will—breaking his promise to leave Joe half his brand."

"Pretty soft for you," grumbled Limpy. "The kid gets throwed, and you'll get the whole shooting match. For two bits I'd light out after him with Swede, so's you wouldn't have no witnesses to prove your dadghasted will."

"Why jump on me?" mildly remonstrated Parlen. "Of course you've always liked Joe best. But haven't we been friends? I'd be glad to go havvers with Joe, and make you foreman, if— But that's just talk. Uncle Lor is apt to live long enough to see us both under the sod."

"He is," agreed the old puncher. "He shore is—barring pizen chuck and lead."

"No danger of lead, now that Joe has cleared out," said Parlen.

He yawned, shoved his half-eaten plum duff from him, and looked at the old watch that he had bought cheap in town from a poker "busted" cowboy.

"Eight o'clock. Wondered why I was so sleepy. Time to turn in."

He yawned again and went into his bedroom without a light. Limpy hear the *scream* of the broken springs on the young man's cot.

Curley, the cook, had washed most of the supper

dishes. He left them to dry and headed for the bunk-house. Limpy hobbled out after him, but circled in the opposite direction, around the far side of the house. He had an uneasy feeling that Joe might still be hanging about the ranch. But he saw no trace of him. Passing the lighted window of Brent's room he peered through the dirty glass. His boss sat at a small table, intently checking over items in his account book.

That he had wound up years of mistreatment by casting off his sister's son mattered nothing to Taylor Brent. He was enjoying his one great pleasure in life—feeling the strong yellow pulse of his pocketbook-heart.



## CHAPTER XI

### SOME SLICK SNAKE

**A**T THE dawn breakfast Limpy concluded that Brent must have kept figuring his profits until very late in the night. As a rule, the cowman was first man in the kitchen after Curley. This morning the most laggard of the punchers reached the table, and still the boss did not appear.

Parlen came in, yawning. He nodded sleepily to Limpy, wound his watch, and went out to wash. When he returned, breakfast was well under way. Yet his uncle's seat still had no occupant. He looked at it, hesitated, and sat down. As he started to saw at his fat salt pork, a Mexican with a bandaged right arm slid in past the half-closed outer door. He was followed by a lanky, red-nosed American.

"*Buenos dias, señors,*" greeted the leader.

"Hell-o," sang out Limpy. "I'll be gosh-danged if 'tain't our admire-for-to-lose friends, Mex and Hooch. You fellers sure got your nerve with you, turning up ag'in after the way the boss sent you packing. 'Smatter, Mex? Looks sort of like you run into a hunk of lead."

Hooch shoved himself and his Mexican mate into places near the foot of the table.

"Where's Mr. Brent? We come to tell him something he ought to know. 'Blige us, Curley, by slam-

ming on some your chuck and slumgullion. Mex is 'most all in. We should ought to've got here last night, but he couldn't make it."

"Who shot him?" demanded Parlen. "What's your business, anyhow?"

The lanky man paused to gulp the scalding hot cup of black coffee that was slammed down before him by the cook.

"Uh!" he grunted. "You sure am some hot coffee boiler, Curley. Why, 'bout our business, Mister Parl, it ain't no secret. We done got on to ride for the Seven Up. You-all know Mex can out-track a 'Pache. Well, a rustler's been monkeying with the Seven Up calves. Aunt Ki ordered us to go get him. We ain't looking for no trouble. We just followed the trail here. Looks like the rustler's trying to throw dirt on your uncle. He used a Circle B iron."

"He did?" exclaimed Parlen. "Who is it? Do you know him?"

"Not him, but them, Parl," cut in old Limpy. "The slick snakes — trying to saddle it on the kid! He beat you to it, Hooch. We got the facts. If you two nosey skunks trailed a rustler here, 'twas one of you following t'other."

Hooch discreetly held fast to his knife and spoon and kept his hands above the level of the table. He knew he was quicker on the draw than the old top-rider, but the time was not ripe for fireworks.

"Aw, give a feller a chance to make good on the real facts," he appealed. "We caught him with his

iron hot. Tried to take him alive, so's he'd have to own up he wasn't using the Circle B by his uncle's orders."

"You did?" queried Parlen.

"Yes, sir. We sneaked up on him and throwed. Mex noosed him. But he was too quick for us. Busted Mex's arm and had me covered 'fore I could draw. You must 'a' saw Mex's hair *reata* on the kid's saddle. He done stole it."

"Always did think that was how Mex got that there hair rope," put in Limpy.

Parlen spoke with authority.

"Quit your scratching, Limpy. This is a matter for Uncle Lor to pass on. Go tell him."

"Scuse me. I got to have time to chew. Swede, you roll out the boss. You ain't got no nerves that mind being cussed."

With plainly evident reluctance, the big towhead rose and scuffled into the front part of the house. The knob of Brent's bedroom-office door rattled. Parlen bent forward over his plate. Through the thin partition rumbled Swede's gruff voice:

"Hey, boss, 'scuse me, but them there lying coyotes——"

The words chopped off into abrupt silence. Then heavy boots trod the creaking floor boards back to the kitchen partition. Swede swung back into the kitchen, his pistol drawn. He leveled it at the visitors.

"Throw up!" he roared. "Grab 'em, boys."

Hooch's hands shot upwards, and Mex's unin-



jured arm followed suit. But both men stared as if utterly amazed.

"Hu-what you mean?" Hooch stuttered. "Huh-huh—he didn't tell you to——"

"Shut up, you!" shouted Swede. "Get a couple ropes, boys. They got Mr. Brent. He's sitting there—bullet clean through his head."

In an instant the visitors were jammed in a mass of clutching, striking, cursing punchers. Reeling from blows on his red nose and ear, Hooch howled at the top of his voice:

"Parl! Call 'em off—call 'em off, or I'll—*Ow!*"

A smash on the chin cut short the threat. But Parlen at last managed to shout down the yells and curses of the little mob.

"Stop it! stop it, boys! Leave 'em alone! Get their guns and stand clear. Swede—Bill—Curley, hold 'em. That's it. If Uncle Lor is shot, I'm boss here. Limpy, you come in and look. We want some proof before we string up anybody."

Limpy had kept out of the rush. He was already at the inner door. Parlen followed him to the open doorway of the office.

Taylor Brent sat at the table almost exactly as Limpy had seen him through the window the night before. The only difference was that his head had sagged down on his chest. The steel-jacketed bullet had drilled clean through, from back of the right ear to the left temple.

Parlen thrust his hand over Limpy's shoulder to point at the little hole in the window pane.

“Get the size of that,” he ordered. “It will tell us the caliber of the killer’s rifle.”

Limpy sidled around the ghastly figure at the table to look close at the bullet hole in the window glass. Behind him Parlen stepped quickly to the table. Between the lax fingers of the murdered man lay a pen. He had pushed his account book aside and was writing on a sheet of stiff letter paper when the assassin’s bullet cut short all his mean and grasping schemes.

Paper, table and account book were all splotted with blackening crimson. But part of the writing was still readable. As Parlen’s eyes fell upon the words, “Last Will of—” he reached out and flipped the paper face down on the far side of the table.

“What caliber?” he demanded.

The old top-rider faced about, with a glimmer of anxiety behind his show of unconcern.

“It’s a thirty-two.”

“Same as Joe’s,” muttered Parlen.

“Sure, and yourn.”

Parlen’s thin lip curled.

“Bah! We’ll see if anybody heard the shot. You know he has a Maxim silencer. I haven’t. Besides, you know I had no cause to do this, and Joe did, and you know I was in bed asleep.”

“We-ell, I heard you turn in.”

“Which chokes off any more fool blatting about me. Now, about Hooch and Mex. Their rifles are thirty-eights. That lets them out. Hop lively.”

Back in the kitchen, Parlen got in first word.

“Limpy says it was a thirty-two, same as my rifle and Joe’s. You know what Mex and Hooch pack. Give ’em back their pistols. The shot was fired early last night. Blood is nearly black. Any you boys hear the shot?”

The men stared at one another inquiringly. None answered. Parlen tightened his lips.

“I hate to say it, but we’ve got to face the facts, boys. You all know he has a Maxim silencer for his rifle. I haven’t. For another thing, I’ve stood in thick with Uncle Lor ever since I came back from the Seven Up. But Joe—well, no need to tell you how sore he was at Uncle Lor. That cutting him out of the will was cause enough. Last night all of you heard him threaten to shoot.”

“Lord, what we waiting for?” cried one of the men who particularly disliked Joe. “Loan Mex a fresh cayuse. He’ll lead us to the bloody ’sassin.”

Owing to his age and lameness, Limpy tail-ended the rush to the horse corral. By the time he was ready to swing his rope, the only horses left for his choice were a slow old buckskin and the tired bronchos of Hooch and Mex. He saddled the buckskin.

Mex had already picked up the trail of Joe’s mare. It led south, straight across country, and was so plainly marked in the dry, sandy thin-sodded soil that the expert tracker followed it at a gallop.

The prints of the mare’s hoofs showed that for a short time her rider had kept her at a lope. Then, as if reckless of pursuit, he had slackened the pace to a walk. Hooch, riding closest to his Mexican



*amigo*, called the good news to the others.

Some of the hotheads yelled for Chavez to use quirt and spur. But Parlen was now owner of the Circle B, and he voiced the sound judgment of cool-headed foresight.

"We'll hold to a lope, boys. Don't want to blow our horses. If we do, he'll have a chance to out-run us when we jump him."

The forward-spurring men dropped back to their places behind the leaders. Though they cursed with impatience, they knew that their young boss was right. They also knew that none of them was as good a tracker as Chavez. If they rushed ahead, they might blot out the trail for their Mexican bloodhound, lose it themselves, and mislead him away from it.

The wild race from the ranch had left Limpy almost a mile behind. He continued to ply the buckskin with quirt and spur until he saw how fast he was closing the gap between himself and the bunch. Easy enough for a man of his long experience to guess the reason. He at once allowed the buckskin to slow into a lope.

The leaders were now only half a mile ahead. As long as they did not quicken the pace, the buckskin could lope along all day without losing any more distance. But to rush up on the bunch might overstrain the old broncho, or start the rest of the party off again on a dead run. Limpy was satisfied to let well enough alone.

Up in the lead Parlen and Hooch kept exchanging

calculations based on facts and probabilities. Though Joe had continued at a walk, he had an all-night start of the pursuers. But he seemed to have been so indifferent to the danger of pursuit that he might have stopped at sun-up to eat.

He had giped his uncle about having an empty food sack. Perhaps he had lied. If not, the sagebrush was alive with jackrabbits and cottontails and sage hens. No need for him to have gone without breakfast. Allowing a half hour stop for the meal, and no faster pace than a jog, he would not be far beyond the south drift fence of the Circle B. The trackers could expect to overtake him about noon.

Every one of the tough range horses was well able to hold to a steady lope half a day, and then wind up with a long race at top speed. But the best plan would be to sight the fugitive before he had become aware of his pursuers. It would then be easy to circle around and head him off. The south end of the Circle B range and the country beyond was rolling and dotted with patches of scrub.

The trail led on straight south. Parlen recalled that old Limpy had advised his pet to head for Arizona. The information won a leer of understanding from Hooch.

"He's striking for the high pass in the main range. Don't savvy, though, him moseying along at a walk. Shore is a nervy kid."

"Too nervy," said Parlen. "He's liable to try to cut loose at the whole bunch of us; you and me and Mex first, for choice."

The lanky man considered this, looking down his red nose.

"Huh. Mebbeso I get you, and mebbeso I don't. *Sabe Dios*. Aunt Ki offered two hundred for him — alive."

Parlen glanced back to make sure no one else was within hearing. He spoke in a quiet, matter-of-fact tone:

"I'll make it three, in addition to what's already coming to you. You have the right to defend yourself if he threatens to draw. Look at your side-kick's arm. Besides, he's wanted for murder."

"Three hundred? It's a go," agreed Hooch. "He's a desp'rit desperado. He's a red-handed 'sassin. On'y thing, how 'bout him walking off this-away? 'Twon't look much like murder to a jury."

"That's easy," said Parlen. "He knew Limpy was the only good tracker on the Circle B. Counted on him to lead us off the wrong way. He thought he had laid up Mex; did not figure on being trailed by the best tracker north of the Apache country."

Hooch could not hold in his admiration.

"Lord, but you're some slick snake!"

Parlen met this with eyes as glassy, if not as cold, as had been his uncle's when angered.

"I can take care of myself. You can show no proof or motive against me. But a jury would send you and Mex to the pen just on what Joe charged you with last night. Best thing for you is to close his mouth. You'll then get your money and skip the Yamparo country for keeps."



The red-nosed man paused only to shoot out a stream of tobacco juice that had blocked his utterance.

“You done said a mouthful, Parl! Keeps it am. Me and Mex ain’t hankering to bed down with no rattlesnake.”

Whether or not this was meant as a compliment, Parlen rightly took it for a sincere expression of agreement. He had convinced the badman that he was by far the more deadly. The fellow would clear out with his Mexican side-kick and never head back to the Yamparos.

Hooch avoided the glassy stare of his riding mate and returned to his scrutiny of the country ahead.

The trackers had already covered many miles from the ranch-house. Not long after mid-morning the steady lope of their horses brought them within sight of the Circle B’s south drift fence. At an order from Parlen, big Swede galloped ahead to cut the wires. The party loped through the gap and slowed to a jog up the stiff ridge on the far side of the fence.

Limpy, still lagging half a mile in the rear, gained quite a little before the party reached the round of the ridge. He kept his far-sighted old eyes fixed upon them. He knew that the ridge crest gave a long view southwards.

As the leaders of the party neared the top he saw them duck down and wheel back. A moment later the bunch scattered to right and left. Limpy slung his spurs into the old buckskin.

## CHAPTER XII

### THE NECKTIE PARTY

**W**HEN the bunch jogged up over the round of the ridge, Mex had continued to keep his gaze on the trail close ahead. But Hooch had instantly glanced up and down the dry creek bed at the foot of the south slope.

Just above the lower bend was a green-scummed waterhole. Close beyond the clump of small cottonwoods that bordered the pool Hooch saw a picketed bay mare. His sharp warning brought the heads of his companions low and their horses around in a quick backward twist.

Parlen gave his orders with cool authority.

“Circle, boys. He’s my cousin, but don’t forget he’s a dead shot. Keep behind cover and close in quiet. Maybe we can get the drop on him.”

Even the hotheads saw the good sense of this. They raced both ways along the near slope of the ridge, but took the crest with great caution. Joe Gale was as handy with a rifle as with a pistol.

Hooch and Parlen, with Chavez now following, sidled along to where they could cross over and work down behind a screen of chaparral. To give the others time to flank the cottonwoods, they crept slowly around the border of the dense thicket. But the distance down to the waterhole was so short that

Hooch soon made out the motionless form that lay under the trees.

"There he is!" he whispered. "'Sleep or shamming. The nervy cuss! Hung up his saddle — no, it's a saddle of ven'son. C'mon. It's in short range. We can get the drop on him."

Parlen slipped off his horse to follow, but carefully kept behind the leader. Chavez, having a disabled gun arm, excusably held back. Hooch was afraid of no man — if he could get the drop on him. The man under the trees continued to lie motionless. From the lower corner of the chaparral Hooch was within short pistol range.

He covered the outstretched man with his revolver, and advanced without waiting for the circling riders to close in. Parlen and Mex Chavez followed at his heels. All three walked quickly but lightly. Still the man under the cottonwoods did not stir. Hooch shifted sideways until he could see the sleeper's relaxed face.

Sight of their leaders closing in afoot started the encircling riders on a wild charge for the cottonwoods. Parlen uttered a sharp order. Hooch sprang at the sleeper and kicked him in the side.

Roused from his slumber to sudden alertness, Joe half turned to jump to his feet. The butt of Hooch's heavy six-shooter crashed on the back of his head. As Joe went down, Hooch snatched his pistol from its holster.

The other men jumped off their horses and rushed in, yelling and flourishing their pistols. Dazed by



the blow on his head, Joe staggered to his feet. Big Swede out-jumped the bunch. He clutched the reeling boy fast in his long arms.

"Shy off," he shouted. "I got him."

But more than one of the men wanted the satisfaction of beating the prisoner. Parlen flung himself between them and his cousin. For a few moments he was caught fast with Swede and Joe in the jam of yelling attackers.

"Back up!" he shouted. "You're hitting me, you jack burros. Back up. So. Now hold your horses. Hooch has his gun, but he may have another. You, Bill, frisk him."

Bill had once served as deputy sheriff. He ran expert hands over the body of the prisoner. He found no concealed pistol. But from one of the overall pockets his clutching fingers drew a little drum-like piece of metal—the Maxim silencer. Parlen looked from it to the wolfish faces of his men.

"You see, boys. That's why no one heard the shot. But he's my cousin. I've got to pull out of this. It's up to you."

"Hold on," growled Swede. "The kid's a Circle B man. He gets a jury trial."

Parlen did not reply. He was hurrying back upslope to his horse. Swede released one arm from about Joe to clutch at his pistol. But another man was already snatching the weapon from its holster. Half a dozen muzzles thrust into the face of the big towhead or prodded him in the back. Joe was torn out of his grasp and lashed hand and foot.

A gloating cry from Chavez brought Hooch's red-eyed gaze around from the still-dazed prisoner to the hanging saddle of deer meat. Joe had picketed his mare with his own rope and used the horsehair *reata* to suspend his game from a limb. The Mexican started to lower the meat. Hooch saw the point.

"Hey, fellers," he yelled. "Me and Mex has got a gents' furniture store. Here's the necktie. Fetch on the gent."

The sally won a roar of laughter from the bunch. Rough hands dragged Joe around to the dangling venison and jerked him to his feet. He swayed, still giddy from that savage blow of Hooch's gun butt.

"Lookut the yeller cur wobble," jeered Bill.

The taunt stung Joe out of his daze. He stiffened. His ruddy brown eyes flashed.

"What d'you think you're doing, you sneaking coyotes?" he demanded. "You've no call to haze me. I'm off the Circle B—clean off."

"Shore—and you'll be off this here range, too, *muuy pronto*," retorted Bill, with an upward jerk of his thumb that made the joke plain to his fellows.

Their mirth over this stroke of subtle wit was added to by another quirk of Hooch's store-keeper humor. He had freed the noose of the *reata* from the saddle of venison.

"Pleasure yourself to step round thisaway, kid. Here's the purtiest necktie you ever seen. Reg'lar style for gents as is too handy with lead."

Joe turned and for the first time perceived the real intent of the mob. He had thought they had

trailed him merely to vent their meanness in a farewell beating. He stiffened still more and stared around from man to man.

Swede stood a few feet away, helpless to interfere. But Joe did not see the pistol with which one of the lynchers was prodding his friend in the back.

"You too, Swede!" he cried. "I can savvy how you and the bunch are all in cahoots with Uncle Lor and Parl and Hooch and Mex, rustling Aunt Ki's calves. But I never thought a side-kick like you would help string me up for putting the old lady wise."

Though Swede's hard-set face did not change, the cords of his neck twitched.

"I got a gun muzzle boring into my back, kid," he muttered. "Wanted you should have a jury trial. The boys don't agree. It's on you. I don't blame you a little bit for plugging the old man. On'y you should've hit the high places, 'stead of loafing along all night."

Joe's eyes widened.

"What d'you mean? 'Plugging the old man!' What's the joke?"

Hooch had not forgotten Parlen's suggestions.

"The joke's on you, kid, guessing you'd laid up Mex, so's he couldn't track you. That's why you moseyed off like you was taking a *pasear*. Figgered Limpy'd lead us t'other way and get us all balled up in the Yamparos, whiles you walked off 'cross the sierra. You knowed Mex can track like a 'Pache, on'y you figgered you'd laid him out."



The gibes were wasted. Joe was gazing into the stern faces of his other captors.

"I see you're going to make it your privilege to string me up, even if I don't agree. Give me my gun, and I'll stand up to the whole bunch of you. But of course I can't expect any fair play or decency from a pack of skunks that'll rustle off an old lady and a girl."

"Choke his blatt!" shouted Bill, righteously indignant. "You, Hooch, sling us that rope."

Hooch flung the noose of the horsehair *reata* over the head of the prisoner. Bill jerked it tight around his neck. All the other men, except Swede's guard, ran to haul on the loose end of the rope. It jerked tight over the stout cottonwood branch, fifteen feet up. The rope pullers heaved. Joe was hoisted up on his toes—off his feet. He swung clear of the ground, choking. His face crimsoned—purpled. He was fast strangling to death.

A pistol muzzle jabbed into the back of the man whose pistol muzzle was against Swede's back.

"Mum," warned the cracked voice of Limpy Smith. "Pass your gun to Swede—*pronto!*"

The dumfounded guard thrust his pistol into Swede's backward reaching hand and obeyed Limpy's urgent order to jump in front of them. Time was short. Joe was now swinging three feet off the ground and almost gone. His face had begun to blacken.

Limpy swung up two pistols, his own and Parlen's.

"Leggo!" he yelled. "Hands up!"

His shot at the rope failed to cut it, but gave a kick to his command. The sudden release of the rope dropped the victim on the dusty ground. More or less rapidly the bunch put up their hands at sight of Limpy and Swede advancing upon them behind the disarmed guard.

"Line up," ordered Limpy. "Face the crik. You, Hooch, yank that noose offen the kid."

The dry tone of his cracked voice meant business. Again came quick obedience. At another command from the old top-rider, Swede caught up one of Joe's blankets and went down the line, collecting all pistols.

"Keno!" approved Limpy. "Now, you boys, back up to the waterhole. Ride herd on 'em, Swede."

As the old man gave the command, he bent over Joe to cut the hogging-strings that bound his arms and legs. Joe's face was still purple, but he had not been quite strangled. He was beginning to gasp. Limpy brought a hatful of water and dashed it into his young friend's face.

The shock quickened Joe's return to consciousness. He gasped deeper and struggled up on his elbow. His bloodshot eyes stared vacantly at the old man. They brightened with recognition, only to cloud over with black despair.

"Limpy! Why'd you go and pull me—back? I was gone—rainbows—happy dreams. Now you . . . back in hell!"

"Aw, forget it, kid. Them skunks just nachelly grabbed the chance to take out their cussedness on you. 'Twasn't cause they blame you for plugging

the boss. Don't you fret 'bout that. Ain't nobody don't know how mean he treated you. He on'y got what's been coming to him for nigh on twenty year. Don't you fret none 'bout giving him hisn."

Joe sat upright, his fingers on his rope-burned neck.

"You baldfaced old liar! You're bad as Swede — backing the gang. Y'don't mean to tell me Uncle Lor's been shot, really!"

The eye of Limpy that was of sight of the balked lynchers drew down in a knowing wink.

"That's the ticket, kid. You don't know nothing 'bout no shooting. You was miles from the ranch. You come away slow, walked your mare all night. That's your alibi. On'y trouble, nobody heard the shot. Best cache that there silencer."

"They found it on me. Yet I—" Joe's lips tightened. "But for you and Swede to believe I did it!"

"Shucks!" soothed Limpy. "Are you gone deaf, kid? I told you not even that bunch of ornery cusses blame you a mite. On'y, course, thay's plenty of folks'll feel bound to get the noose on you. What say, me and Swede cut loose with you? We can leave the bunch afoot, but turn their hosses loose at the Broken Box ranch, 'fore we strike into the mountains. Easy 'nough to lose any trailers over 'cross the sierra."

The purple of Joe's face had moderated into crimson. He got upon his feet, unsteady in body, but far from unsteady in mind.



"You're all right, Limpy. I take it back. Just the same, I'm no quitter. I didn't shoot Uncle Lor. I didn't know he'd been shot till Swede let out the secret. I'm not going to run away and leave folks to believe I did it. All I ask for is a fair trial in court."

Limpy's grim mouth twisted.

"You're asking for the rope at the pen, kid, 'stead of here. They got a dead cinch on you. The hole in the winder was made by a thirty-two, and you just told me you was crazy 'nough to let 'em find your silencer on you."

Joe nodded.

"Fool trick, wasn't it? Well, if I'm cinched I'm cinched. Nobody is going to say I'm afraid to take my medicine. Go bring in my mare."

The old top-rider stifled a groan and obeyed. The kid always had been bullheaded. But at least he should have his wish for a court trial. No more attempts at a lynching.

When the party mounted to take the back trail, Joe's holster held his pistol. He swung in with Swede and Limpy behind the disarmed lynchers.

Well up the ridge slope Bill, the foremost rider, saw a horse partly screened by the chaparral.

"Hey, Limpy," he sang out. "Here's Parl's roan. Didn't hit for home afoot, did he?"

"Cut him loose," replied Limpy.

Bill swung off and looked around into the opening of the pocket in the chaparral. Parlen lay beside his horse, neatly gagged with his own neckerchief

and hog-tied. He had been so intent upon watching the gang lynch Joe that Limpy had ridden down from the ridge crest and taken him by surprise.

While Bill freed his new boss he told him rather sheepishly how the old top-rider had got the drop on them all and turned loose the prisoner. Parlen quietly mounted and rode off at the head of the party, without a word of comment or a single glance back at his cousin.

A little way beyond the Circle B drift fence Limpy ordered Swede to herd the disarmed men on to the ranch. He himself turned off with Joe and headed across country for the railroad.

## CHAPTER XIII

### KIOWA SHIFTS

LATE on the following afternoon Hooch Huggins and Mex Chavez jogged down the round-up road to the Seven Up ranch.

Old Kiowa greeted them with sour disappointment.

"You quitters! Let him get back to his hole, did you? Didn't have nerve enough to yank him out of it! Went and let Lor Brent run you off!"

Chavez muttered a hasty, "*Ave, Maria—salvar nos!*" and crossed himself. Hooch squinted down his red nose.

"Brent he done stopped running off nobody, including calves what ain't hisn."

"What's that? You don't mean——"

"Yep. He scratched the kid one too many. The kid got him, night 'fore last, from outside, through the winder."

Mary's blue eyes went almost black.

"Not Joe! He never could have——never——never!"

"They got it on him, ma'am. Bullet was from his rifle. It's a cinch. Mex tracked him for the Circle B's. Some of the boys was so mad they strung him up—on'y Limpy had to horn in and spoil the fun. Him and the kid streaked for town, according to Swede. He says the kid was



aiming to give hisself up. I'm betting he turns up missing."

"How about Parl?" queried Kiowa.

Hooch spat and ventured a half grin.

"The sorrowing new boss is heading for town with the corpse of his b'lov'd uncle—and his uncle's will making him sole owner of the Circle B."

The old cow-woman cast an uneasy look at Mary. Parlen was now the richest stockgrower in the Yamparo country. If only she could have foreseen this, she might have been less hasty in ordering him off the Seven Up. He had really wanted the girl. Perhaps, even now, she might be able to make up with him.

As for Joe, the young fool certainly had done for himself. No danger after this of Mary ever considering him. In snuffing out his uncle, he had absolutely killed every chance he otherwise might have had to regain his standing with the girl. Much as Brent had been hated, a man of his wealth would have to be properly avenged. The boy would get a life sentence, if not the noose.

He certainly was all kinds of a fool. Why had he let himself get caught? And, when saved by Limpy from lynching, why had he not skipped the country? Hooch might believe he was doing so now. But if Swede thought the boy had intended to give himself up, that was exactly what he would do. It was just like the bullheaded young fool.

Old Kiowa pursed her wrinkled lips.

"I figger it's time to haul out a load of supplies.

We'll start for town at daybreak, Mary. Hooch, you and Mex'll help Rucker get things in shape for the round-up."

Chavez scratched his fast-healing arm, shot a side-long glance at his American side-kick, and turned his shifty gaze on the horizon. Hooch met the old woman's hawk stare with a look of bland, unblinking servility.

"Yes'um. You can count on us doing things up in pink ribbons, Aunt Ki. How 'bout that two hundred? If the kid has went and put his neck in the noose ag'in, seems like me and Mex should ought to come in for what you done promised."

"You haven't delivered him to me."

"No'um. Just the same, we got the proof on him for rustling, and he knowed Mex was tracking him. He killed his uncle 'fore we got to the Circle B, 'cause Brent hadn't nerve 'nough to back the kid and bluff us. The kid got him, and me and Mex got the kid — if he ain't flew the coop. You wanted Brent, and you same as got him. Y'ought to pay me and Mex that two hundred."

"Not 'less it comes out that the boy was rustling by his uncle's orders. I didn't want Lor Brent drilled. I wanted him branded."

The lanky man looked down his nose and smirked.

"You're the doc, ma'am. Me and Mex figger on getting from you all you owe us. Reckon we ain't going to lose out on this deal."

"You'll get what's coming to you, no more, no less," snapped Kiowa.

"Yes'um. We shore will. 'Tain't like we was dealing with Brent—nor Parl."

Kiowa frowned to hide her gratification that even such questionable characters as these unsavory drifters should rely on her sense of justice and fair dealing. She ordered them to grease the axles of the chuck-wagon and overhaul the harness, while Rocker brought in the best span of wagon-broke horses.

In the red dawn, when she and Mary climbed up on the wagon seat, Chavez kept himself out of sight. But Hooch saw them off, with a cheerful, "*Adios*, Miss Mary. Needn't hurry back, Aunt Ki. Me and Mex'll look after things o. k."

The old cow-woman nodded. After all, the fellow was a top-hand, and he had admitted that he and his Mexican partner knew when they were well off. The summer with Lor Brent had shown them how vastly more preferable was employment on the Seven Up. There was little now to do until the beef roundup. She could throw all range worries over her shoulder and turn her thoughts to the matter of Mary's future.

Of late the girl had been looking a bit peaked. There was a shadow back in her blue eyes. But that sad appealing look often got a girl's rope on a man quicker than any smile. Perhaps after Parlen saw it he could be led to believe that Mary was pining for him.

One thing certain: Mary was anxious to get to town. Though she said little about it, she drove as she had never driven before. Without at any time



over-straining the team, she pushed them to their limit. Her grandmother gripped the bouncing wagon-seat and raised no objections.

Instead of camping, as usual, several miles short of town, Mary kept on. The leg-weary horses jogged into Main Street two hours after nightfall. The little hotel was full. Kiowa had to ask hospitality from an old-time acquaintance. While she and Mary filled their hungry mouths, their night-gowned hostess pumped gossip into their still more hungry ears.

Had they heard about the killing of Taylor Brent by his younger nephew? Yes, the boy had given himself up. No, he had not confessed. He had just ridden in and told the sheriff his uncle had been shot and some of the Circle B men accused him of doing it.

No, Limpy Smith had not come in with the boy. He turned up with the Circle B bunch the next day. They had brought in the body of the murdered man and the window with the bullet hole and the boy's rifle silencer. Yes, Parlen Brent was in charge of the party. Yes, he had already filed his uncle's will. It gave him all the Circle B.

The town was full of folks because Joe Gale had waived preliminary examination and was to be put on trial right away. The old jail was out of repair. Easy enough to batter in the door, if the Circle B boys should take a notion to save the county court expenses. Besides, everybody wanted to get the trial over with and the boy on his way to Cañon City before the round-up.

Mary said nothing but stopped eating. Most of the night she lay wide awake. Towards morning, utterly worn out, she at last fell asleep. When Kiowa turned out, the dawn light was not too dim for her sharp eyes to see the lines of grief in the girl's face. She felt the tear-wet pillow and left the room, bitterly determined.

On her hasty sunrise walk towards the hotel she passed the postoffice. The postmaster, an old friend, obliged her with her mail—two weekly papers, a livestock journal, and an official letter from the State School Board. She opened the letter, read it through twice, and walked back, grim-eyed, to the house.

At the unearthly late hour of eight, Mary shamefacedly came down from the attic guest-room. Her grandmother, gossiping in the kitchen with their hostess, met her with a smile.

"'Sall right, Babe. Miz Gowan has kept yours nice and hot in the warming oven."

Tears blurred the girl's heavy eyes. Not in many years had her grandmother spoken so tenderly or called her by that pet name.

"I thank you ever so much, Mrs. Gowan, but I don't feel much like eating."

"Yes, you do," contradicted her grandmother. "Parl Brent is stopping at the hotel. So are the Goodmorrow girls. You ain't going to let him think you're pining 'cause you missed hitching up with the owner of the biggest brand in the Yamparo country, are you?"

Mary winced as if lashed across the face with a quirt. Her cheeks went white, and as quickly flooded with scarlet. Her eyes flashed.

"That's the ticket!" approved Kiowa. "No dying dog 'bout you. We'll show him. Climb outside your chuck. We'll be late."

The breakfast eaten by Mary would almost have satisfied her usual healthy young appetite. Kiowa promptly hurried her to the little town's main clothing store. The store had just received its small but select stock of goods for the fall trade with wealthy stock-growers' wives and daughters.

When Kiowa and Mary came out into Main Street, Mary was dressed no less stylishly than the Goodmorrow girls, who had bought their costumes in New York. A few moments later Limpy and Swede left the store by the rear door.

Parlen had escorted stately Mrs. Goodmorrow and her daughters to the court house. Kiowa and Mary, coming from the opposite direction, met them in front of the group of loungers on the court house steps. Kiowa greeted the snobbish matron with hearty cordiality.

"Well, well, howdy, Anniebella! Hardly would 'a' knowed you, you're getting so fat. My, how the years slide by! Seems no more'n yesterday when you used to cook for me, Anniebella. Yet look at these fine growed-up young ladies of yours. Just home from finishing school, I hear. Didn't know 'twas so healthy back East. Look at their rosy cheeks."



Stately Mrs. Goodmorrow fumbled for her gold lorgnette. The Misses Goodmorrow drew back from the impossible old cow-woman, noses up and cheeks flushing scarlet around the thickly laid-on rouge. They ignored Mary's friendly smile and nod—but not her costume. Their critical eyes sought to find a flaw, and were grievously disappointed to discover that the general effect was borne out by every artistic detail, from the modish hat to the real silk stockings and the very latest type of sandals.

Parlen saw neither the details nor the critics. He was not even aware that Mary had dressed up in city clothes. He was only vaguely conscious of the general effect as the frame of her beauty. Great as had been his passion for her, he had never before fully realized the loveliness of her deep blue eyes and golden hair. The wildrose pink under the tan of her cheeks was real.

Alongside her the finishing-school graduates, whom he had been regarding with great interest and respect, suddenly faded to painted dolls. What matter if their father owned the outfit next largest to his own? Mary's hair was like a maze of pure gold threads. He wanted her. He must have her. His calculating eyes flamed with the volcanic upwelling of his desire.

Kiowa was on the alert. From the instant Parlen fixed his gaze on Mary she had not missed the slightest flicker of the changes that came over his face. Her sudden thrust pushed Mary past him and up the steps before the girl could turn from the Good-

morrow girls and betray whatever feelings she might now have for the owner of the Circle B.

Parlen did not wait to enter the court house with Mrs. Goodmorrow and her daughters. He followed close behind Mary. All the spectators' seats in the little court room were occupied. Kiowa nodded to the young bank teller who sat in the middle of the front row. He looked at Mary, and at once rose to offer her his seat. Kiowa insisted that she accept the favor.

"Got to 'tend to some business, Babe," she said. "Can't leave you standing here alone."

Mary became aware of Parlen at her elbow. She hastened to thank the bank teller and take the seat.

## CHAPTER XIV

### THE COURSE OF JUSTICE

**K**IOWA left Parlen standing in the aisle and went back into the hall. Knots of people stood talking about the sensational murder and the killer's small chance of escaping the penalty.

The general sentiment seemed to be that the boy deserved hanging, less for what he had done than for what he had not done. Nobody mourned the passing of the coldest-blooded, meanest brand owner in the Yamparo country. Everybody knew how he had nagged and abused his younger nephew. But the young fool ought to have cleared out and saved the county the cost of trying him.

With this Kiowa took occasion to differ bitterly. She shifted from group to group, letting drop hints that if she were on the jury, the murderer would get what he rightly deserved. She added, more guardedly, that she had reason to believe the murder might have been due to the boy's rustling of her calves.

Parlen had followed the old woman out into the hall, without, he believed, being seen by her. He trailed her from group to group, keeping out of her sight. The venom of her tongue and words in speaking about Joe soon convinced him that she was in deadly earnest. He slipped into the office of the district attorney.



Kiowa returned to the crowded court room. Before long the bailiff hunted her out and handed her an envelope.

"Couldn't serve you before, Mrs. Orton," he said. "You're drawn on the panel. Come inside the rail. Seat for you."

The old woman shoved past the little swing gate and sat down among the other talesmen, her face as expressionless as an old squaw's.

When court convened, all voters drawn for the panel were sworn. More than the usual proportion sought to escape jury service. Few relished the thought of having to condemn a generally liked young fellow for the killing of a man still more generally disliked and even hated. Kiowa had been the only woman served. She made no attempt to get off.

"I'm willing to do my duty," she said without heat or emphasis.

Her name was last on the panel. The one case on the docket was promptly called. The jailor and sheriff, with a half dozen special deputies, marched in the prisoner from the room across the hall to which he had been smuggled from the jail. Some of the Circle B men had been heard muttering threats.

Out of deference to the wealthy brand owners present, and as a sop to the rancor of the Circle B men, Joe had at the last moment been heavily handcuffed. As he found himself facing the many staring eyes in the court room he flushed and his head went up.

The elderly judge peered down at him with magisterial calmness.

"Who is the defendant's attorney?" he inquired.

"I don't want any lawyer, judge," replied Joe. "I didn't do it, and I know you'll give me a square deal. That's all I need to clear me — a square deal."

Old Kiowa's puckered lips drew apart in a sardonic smile. Behind her Mary was leaning forward, her eyes misted, her lips trembling.

"O — oh!" she sighed. "He says he didn't — didn't do it!"

For a moment she failed to see Parlen as he slipped into the seat beside her grandmother and turned half about. Joe was quicker. He saw Mary's look of tremulous happiness, and he saw the eager backward bending of his cousin to address her. His head drooped.

"Remove the defendant's handcuffs," ordered the judge. "If he insists, he is privileged to act as his own attorney."

Willingly enough, the sheriff freed his prisoner. The boy had saved a deal of trouble by giving himself up. A few moments sooner Joe would have met the removal of his irons with a grin. Now he did not even glance up. He slumped down into the chair at the table to which the sheriff pushed him.

He listened indifferently to the keen voice of the district attorney questioning the first prospective juror. The man was challenged for cause and dismissed. So also were the next three. The fifth man affirmed a positive belief in hanging. He was ac-

cepted by the district attorney.

The judge explained to Joe his right to challenge, either peremptorily or for cause. Joe gave the hard-faced juror a casual glance.

"I've no objection to the gentleman, sir. I agree with him that anybody guilty of murder ought to be hung. Long as I didn't shoot Uncle Lor, all I need is a square deal. This juror looks to me like a white man."

Kiowa Orton tightened her lips. Mary looked past Parlen, and smiled. The annoyed district attorney went on with his questioning of jurymen. He culled out many and chose few. Of the chosen, Joe accepted all without question, except one whose eyes were cold and calculating.

"I'd as lief excuse this gent," he said. "Happens I don't like the cut of his ears."

The man looked at Parlen, and remained seated. The old judge bent over towards him.

"That is equivalent to a peremptory challenge. You are relieved from jury service in this case."

After the selection of another talesman as the eleventh juror, in place of the one "excused" by Joe, the district attorney challenged man after man. At last came the turn of Kiowa Orton. The attorney asked her a few questions, and accepted her for the twelfth place in the jury box.

Joe met the old woman's hawk stare with a flush of resentment.

"Guess I'm as much of a fool as you think me, Aunt Ki. You let Hooch Huggins lie you into be-



lieving I rustled your calves. All the same, I'm willing to bet you'll give me as fair a trial as these other jurors."

The thud of the judge's gavel checked the murmur of favorable comment from the dense crowd behind the rail. All unconsciously, Joe had made a very favorable impression upon everyone in the court room, from judge and jurors to spectators, with the exception of the district attorney and certain members of the Circle B outfit.

But the glow of good feeling steadily dimmed and cooled under the eloquent statement of the district attorney as to what the prosecution expected to prove against the accused. In the midst Joe's hasty temper flared. He jumped up, eyes flashing, chin out, fist threatening the supercilious lawyer.

"You liar! You've no right to——"

The alert sheriff and deputies muffled his mouth and dragged him down into his seat. The judge sternly admonished him against any more such unseemly interruptions of the attorney duly elected to represent the people in the prosecution of persons accused of crimes. Joe defiantly stared up at his censurer.

"That's just the nub," he retorted. "He's calling me a cold-blooded murderer before he's shown a bit of proof. He doesn't know anything about it himself. He wasn't there. D'you mean to tell me I've got to sit here and let him load the jury with all those lies?"

The judge was a just man but very sensitive over

matters of dignity and decorum. He gave the defendant curtly to understand that the district attorney was strictly within his rights and, in fact, was performing his duty in stating the case for the prosecution.

Joe's eyes blazed with scorn.

"That's your law, is it? Give a fellow about as much fair play as Parl's gang of lynchers. Shucks! Go ahead and hang me."

He slouched back into his chair, contemptuously reckless of consequences.

The district attorney accepted the invitation. He proceeded with much skill and energy to prove his case. In quick succession, he had the Circle B men testify to the bad feeling between the accused and his uncle, Taylor Brent; the omission of his name from his uncle's last will; his threats and attempt to shoot his uncle and his cousin, Parlen Brent, in the Circle B ranch kitchen, on the evening of the murder; the discovery that Taylor Brent had been murdered; and the pursuit and capture of the fleeing murderer.

The window with the neatly drilled thirty-two caliber bullet-hole was then introduced as an exhibit, and the town's one doctor testified that Taylor Brent had come to his death by a thirty-two caliber bullet fired through his head. The ex-deputy-sheriff Bill was recalled to identify the Maxim silencer and tell how he had found it upon the person of the accused. This the district attorney skilfully linked up with the evidence that no one had heard the fatal shot.

Throughout it all Joe continued to sit in con-

temptuous silence. He raised no objections, and refused to cross-question any of the witnesses. Neither Parlen nor Limpy Smith nor Swede was called to the stand by the prosecutor, though the two punchers were present with their new boss, among the subpoenaed witnesses.

When called upon by the judge to make his defense, Joe still kept to his headstrong, reckless stand.

"It's up to you, Judge. I didn't shoot Uncle Lor, and I don't know who did. It's true about my being hot at him. But Limpy told me not to make a rumpus. He advised me to go to Arizona. That's all I know about it. I was going off peacefully when Parl and his pack of coyotes tracked me down—tried to lynch me. Looks to me as if you're trying to do the same thing. I——"

The judge sternly interrupted and admonished the defendant against further contempt of court. When he ordered him to proceed, Joe stubbornly tightened his lips and gave his hand a derisive toss.

The district attorney felt so certain of a verdict that he closed the case and limited himself to a half hour's argument. His denunciations of the accused were, however, so scathing that they brought a white flame of righteous wrath into the blue eyes of Mary. Joe neither winced nor flared. He sat recklessly defiant, eying the judge and district attorney with unutterable contempt.

What did he care? Let them go ahead and hang him if they liked. He would be better off dead, anyway. The cards were stacked against him. Ever



since he could remember, he had always been given an unfair deal. He had already lost Mary. Now she had hurried to buy city clothes and make up with Parl.

Thanks be, that legal liar had at last wound up his string of lies to the jury! Now the judge was passing out his instructions to the jury. The bunch would soon — Yes, they were getting their heads together. They were going to brand him out of hand. Well, better to have it over with and settled.

He could not blame the bunch, not even Aunt Ki. On the same showing, he himself would have hung any man. It was only his word against all that evidence. So far as he could see, there had been no way to offset the crooked facts. Perhaps he should have hired a good lawyer. But he had thought they would give him a square deal. Anyhow, what was the difference? There was Parl whispering to Mary.

Aunt Ki's acrid voice cut the deathly hush.

"Judge, some the boys figger they want to mull this over."

The hour was well past the judge's usual luncheon hour. He ordered the jury conducted out under guard, and adjourned court until they should be ready to report.

## CHAPTER XV

### BRAND FOREMAN

THE moment the jury had been locked in a room by itself, one of the men who knew Kiowa, hastened to voice the sentiment of his fellows.

“What’s the use of wasting time? I move we ’lect Aunt Ki foreman and vote the kid guilty. I own a bunch of cows myself. Didn’t cotton to Lor Brent any more than most. But we owners have to stick together. If we don’t make an example of the kid, ’most any ornery buckaroo is apt to up and drill us over some trifle or other.”

The first juror chosen by the district attorney frowned and spat at the cuspidor.

“What ails me is the young devil can’t be hung. You got what the judge said ’bout circumstantial ev’dence. Long’s nobody seen the murderer pull the trigger, the best can be did is send him up for life. Hang such a fool law, I say. The Circle B boys should ought to be kicked for letting Limpy get their noose offen the bloody murderer.”

A town juror made mild protest against this heat.

“Oh, come. We of course must do our duty. But the boy cannot be the black-hearted young devil that the district attorney painted him. I must confess I rather liked the boy. I almost believe he

didn't do it. Remember how he spoke up and said that all he wanted was a square deal?"

"Yeah, and 'member how he sulked when the 'torney scratched him," jeered the hanging juror.

"What of it?" demanded a youngish rider from the Goodmorrow outfit who had seen Parlen making himself agreeable to the daughters of his boss. "The kid 's a damsight—'scuse me, Aunt Ki!—just the samee, he's a damsight better'n his horning-in cousin. If on'y he'd got Parl, too, I'd vote him a medal."

The half hour's wrangle that followed wound up in a dispute over the comparative merits of Herefords and Shorthorns. That, in turn, would have ended in a free-for-all fight had not Kiowa shoved in between the furious disputants.

"Chop off," she ordered. "I'm foreman of this bunch. Quit your jawing 'bout cows till we've agreed on how to brand our maverick."

Though no vote had been taken on the motion to elect the old woman foreman, none of the men jurors questioned her assumption of the position. Abashed by her tart reproof, they came back to the business in hand.

"All the rest of us have given our opinions, Mrs. Orton," said the town juror. "May we now ask you for yours?"

Kiowa pursed her withered lips. One clawlike hand went to the pocket in which was folded the official letter from the School Board that she had received at sunup. Her hawk eyes glittered.

"Course the boy drilled Lor. That stands to



reason," she gave her conviction. "All the same, he's figgering we'll give him a square deal. He's counting on us being white. Ain't that so?"

The aggressive hanging juror was first to make himself heard.

"Nobudy dast say I ain't white and on the square. But I ain't no such fool as to let any young devil pull the wool over my eyes with his softsawdering."

"Sure—nor the rest of us, neither," agreed Kiowa. "And it's same 'bout that powwowing, orating district 'torney. We ain't here to truckle to him and his say-so. We're the jurors in this case. Way he tried to boss us, jawing 'bout we had to do this, and we had to do that! It's 'nough to rile the patience of Job. Jawed at us just like we was a bunch of kids!"

Growls of approval met this tirade. Kiowa blazed away again.

"What do law sharps know 'bout range matters, anyhow? This here killing is our affair. We know Joe Gale, and we knowed Lor Brent. The boy says we're square and white, and he asks us for a square deal. You heard him tell I'm down on him 'cause I believed the lies of Hooch 'bout him rustling my calves."

"'Nuther good whyfor he oughter be strung up," put in the hanging juror.

"Whyfor—'cause I fell for Hooch's lie?" gibed Kiowa. "The boy rode in to the Seven Up to report the same 'gainst Hooch and Mex. Just s'pose he done no rustling himself. I'm guessing he didn't."

Such being the ease, mebbe we can figger out 'nough mitigating circumstances to ease off on him for this shooting. What if——”

“Hold on, Aunt Ki. If——”

The Goodmorrow puncher shook his fist under the nose of the would-be hanger.

“Sew up your lip. What d’you mean busting in on a lady. It’s her say. Go on, Aunt Ki.”

“Thanky, Pete. To resume, my say is, What if the boy did drill Lor Brent? Hadn’t that cold-blooded fish given him plenty of cause? You’ve all heard tell how the mean skinflint starved and over-worked and generally mistreated the poor boy for years.”

One of the quicker-thinking men tried to get in a word.

“But, Aunt Ki, that don’t excuse——”

“Huh! It don’t, don’t it? Shows you never had any dealings with Lor Brent. But have it your own way. I’m talking to the white men here—the men who’re going to give the boy the square deal he’s counting on them giving him.”

“I had dealings with Brent,” remarked the quietest of the jurors. “I know how the stony-faced devil had Joe slaving for him without wages ever since the boy was knee-high to a duck, on the promise of willing him half the Circle B. I vote to recommend a light sentence.”

Kiowa sniffed contemptuously.

“Willing to heat the branding-iron only red-hot, ’stead of white, are you?”

"Ain't he gone and branded his ownself, Aunt Ki?"

The old cow-woman fairly bristled with indignation.

"You listen to me, you dunderheads! The law says a man's persumed innocent till he's proved guilty. We're the jury—not that frog-mouthed 'torney. Joe ain't guilty 'less we say so. All right. Now, didn't the judge tell us not to stick the brand on him 'fwe had a reason-able doubt?"

"Yes, but we all know it's a dead cinch, Aunt Ki, he done it."

"What if he did? Nobody saw him, did they? 'Fwe can reason out a doubt, that's our priv'lege. Lemme tell you. I had a little talk with Limpy and Swede down at the Emporium, while my girl Mary was trying on her new dress. Just remember the 'torney didn't call neither of 'em to the stand—nor Parl, neither."

"That's so," said the town juror.

"Sure it's so. Well, Limpy told me that when the bunch started to trail the boy, nobody looked for tracks where the shot must have been fired from. When he thought of it and hit back to the ranch, he found the ground all tromped up by cows. That's one point."

The hanging juror shook his head.

"You wait," said Kiowa. "It don't stand alone. Here's another. Swede says, when they trailed the boy down, Hooch cracked him on the head, making him groggy. Then Parl snuggled tight up against



him, in the middle of the milling bunch. All right. Happ'ns I know the boy loaned Parl his Maxim silencer. Parl done that shoving up against him 'fore he told Bill to do the frisking. It was then they found the silencer on the boy."

For several moments there was dead silence in the jury room. At last the town juror asked in a low tone:

"You are positive, Mrs. Orton, that the boy loaned it to his cousin."

"Positive—sure for certain—dead sure. Parl showed it to me."

"But—if only you had told that in court! The judge said for us to consider only the evidence."

"He said we ought to consider a reason-able doubt," rejoined Kiowa. "If this ain't an able reason, what is? Don't forget how they fought shy of calling on Limpy and Swede to testify. What d'you say, boys? This lets us out. Nobody's going to cry over Lor Brent. Parl has got his haul, 'fore his uncle could unwill him, like he done to Joe. The boy's had a tough deal all 'long. What d'you say, we give him a square deal now?"

The hanging juror started to argue. Old Kiowa pounded back at him. He was flint. But she was steel.

An hour later a messenger brought word to the judge that the jury had reached a verdict.

Within ten minutes the court room was again packed. Mary sat in the same front seat, on the spectators' side of the rail. She had never left it.

Parlen had brought her food from the hotel. She had not touched a mouthful. She now sat white-faced and wide-eyed, the most tense of all that excited, sensation-gripped crowd of onlookers.

The sheriff and deputies brought in Joe, once more heavily handcuffed. The jury filed in and took their seats. Joe stared at them, more than ever defiant, and fully primed to wither them with his scorn when they should brand him guilty.

The judge made formal inquiry if the jury had reached a verdict. Kiowa stood up, acutely alive to the fact that she was the focal point of every eye in the room. She gave Joe an acrid smile, and spoke out with shrill distinctness:

"We have, Judge. Could 'a' reported long ago, only for the balking of one mule. Just the same, we finally came to a unanimous agreement. We——"

"The verdict, madam?" interrupted the magistrate.

"Now, just you hold your hosses, Judge," advised the lady foreman. "I'm speaking for the jury—what we agreed on. Here you are: We, the jury, being white and on the square, and knowing Joe Gale and Taylor Brent, hereby figger out a reason-able doubt. So we vote the boy not guilty—only he oughtn't to do it again."

In the astonished silence that followed that qualifying final clause Joe sat stunned and bewildered. He had braced himself to meet the shock of being found guilty. His hope of an acquittal had been very slight. His one chance to escape immediate

condemnation had seemed to lie in the possibility of a hung jury. But to be both branded and turned loose.

Through his daze he was vaguely aware of the judge's voice, harsh with exasperation:

“Outrageous disregard of the undisputed evidence . . . utter travesty . . . most unfortunate that in so flagrant a case of the miscarriage of justice, the law does not permit an admitted criminal to be twice put in jeopardy for the same offense.”

There followed a bitter denunciation of the jurors for their failure to bring in a verdict in accordance with the facts. The men looked down at their feet, abashed. Not so their foreman. Kiowa reared up on her high-heeled old boots. She glared unblinkingly into the wrathful face of the judge.

“*Whoa!*” she cried. “Back up, ’fyou don’t want to get throwed. I don’t care a whoop if you’re *two* judges! You ain’t got any call to ride and scratch me—nor any my bunch. We’re the jury in this case, and we’re judges of the facts. You said so yourself. It was up to us. We found the boy not guilty. That settles it. Savvy?”

In the uproar of laughter and applause that greeted this outburst the judge heard few shouts of dissent. The elections were not far distant, and he was up as a candidate to succeed himself. As soon as his pounding gavel brought silence to the court room, he inclined his head stiffly to the irate old cow-woman.



“Madam, the court admits the error of speaking to a lady with undue heat. As you have stated, the jury is sole judge of the weight of evidence in criminal cases. The court should have gone no further than to point out the incorrect wording of the verdict. The evident intent of the jury was to report the act of the defendant as justifiable homicide. You and your fellow jurors are relieved from further service. Court stands adjourned.”

Kiowa popped out of the jury box and swung across to where Parlen had leaned over Mary to whisper how glad he was about the verdict.

“Of course he ought not to have done it, Mary. But we all know how aggravating Uncle Lor could be. I know you’re as sorry as I am over the poor, misguided boy. If it will please you any, I’ll put him on as foreman of the Circle B. You know I’ll do anything to please you, Mary, and make you like me.”

“‘Cept give Joe his half the Circle B,” tartly cut in Kiowa.

“His half? You know Uncle Lor left it all to me, Aunt Ki.”

“Yes, and who’d have it now if someun hadn’t — fixed things — so’s you could cash in on your winnings?”

Mary quivered and shrank.

“Oh, Gran’ma, please! Joe didn’t — you heard him say he didn’t.”

“Mebbeso — mebbeso,” soothed the old woman. “Leastways we ain’t going to have any truck with

the rattler that's crawled into the boots of Lor Brent. Come on, Babe. The air 'round here's bad."

She shoved into the out-jostling crowd with the willing Mary. Parlen Brent, owner of the largest outfit in the Yamparo country, stood where they left him, his eyes stony.

## CHAPTER XVI

### A JOURNEY POSTPONED

OUT of his stunned daze Joe roused to the fact that his wrists were free from the irons and friendly hands were slapping him on the shoulder. The sheriff and deputies and several of the spectators had crowded around to congratulate him over his acquittal.

He heaved himself to his feet.

"Thank you, gentlemen. Guess I'll be on my way. Sheriff, can I trouble you for my mare and layout."

Limpy Smith was lounging outside the door of the court room. Without a word or even a look, he fell in behind Joe and the sheriff. At the jail they found big towheaded Swede waiting with Limpy's broncho and Joe's mare. The sheriff turned over Joe's rifle and pistol, with a parting word of good-will:

"Glad to see you going, kid. Don't call again."

Joe rode off along Main Street, seemingly indifferent to the curious glances of the onlookers. Opposite the last house his two followers pushed forward alongside him. As usual, Limpy spoke for both himself and Swede.

"Where might you be heading for, kid?"

"You advised Arizona."

"Mebbe this is a new deal," suggested Limpy.



"You should ought to've seen Parl's face—just like the old man's. Guess why?"

"I bite."

"He got throwed hard by Aunt Ki—and Miss Mary."

Limpy met Joe's incredulous stare with a nod.

"I seen'um. All during the trial he hung round Miss Mary, trying to make up to her. She looked clean through him. Then Aunt Ki hopped over from 'quitting you and hopped on him good and plenty."

Joe slumped down again in his saddle.

"What's the difference? Aunt Ki herself put the brand on me. Even you and Swede believe I'm guilty."

"Lord, no, kid, not that. Didn't you hear the judge? He says what we all says—just 'fi'ble homey-cide."

"That's it! I've told I didn't do it, yet everybody thinks I did—everybody!"

The old top-rider mumbled uneasily at his quid.

"Um-m-m— We-ell, if everybody agrees with the judge and jury . . . 'sides, 'tain't everybody. There's Miss Mary. She believes your say-so."

The mare reared to her rider's jerk on the curb.

"What? You old son-of-a-gun! That's a bald-faced lie—that and about her passing up Parl. I saw the way she smiled at him—God!"

The sudden cry of despair roused Limpy to full action.

"You gone clean plumb blind, kid? She was look-

ing right past him—at *you*. I seen her 'fore he horned in between. You got Miss Mary all wrong. It's him she's down on, not you. She slipped me a word down in the Empor'um, whilst Aunt Ki was asking Swede 'bout the silencer. She says. 'Tell Joe I was wrong. I'm sorry.'"

"You old liar!"

"'Struth, kid. Them's her words—'Tell Joe I was wrong. I'm sorry.'"

The mare whirled to the rear.

"C'mon, Swede," said Limpy. "Looks sort of like we ain't a-going to Arizony yet-awhile."

At the house where the Seven Up visitors had stopped Joe learned that Kiowa and Mary had already hitched up and rolled out of town. As the three riders were passing the hotel, someone back of the crowd in the veranda called out that the "homicide kid" was doing well to vamoose before the Circle B boys could get into action.

Joe swung off, hitched his mare to the rail, and jingled in to sign the hotel register. Limpy and Swede followed suit. They all went out and strolled the length of Main Street afoot. When they came back to the hotel Parlen Brent and his men had left town.

Lest this might be a ruse, Joe stopped at the hotel over-night. Nobody should think he was going to turn tail and run from that bunch of coyotes. But he might have known that his cousin was not the kind to attempt a second lynching—in the presence of witnesses. At sunup Swede brought

word that the Circle B outfit had not returned to town.

Even then Joe took pains to ride off at an unhurried jog. But once out of sight of the last house he put his mare into a lope. Hour after hour he held to that steady swinging pace, except on the steeper slopes of the cross-country cut-offs. Behind him the tough bronchos of Limpy and Swede pounded along as tireless as the mare.

Yet mid-morning passed, noon came and went, and they had not overhauled the Seven Up chuck-wagon. The reason lay in old Kiowa's mistrust of the new owner of the Circle B. She and Mary had not camped, as usual, at sun-down. They had driven on homewards until late into the night. At dawn they had hitched up and pushed on again at a rattling gait.

When they reached the ranch and drove around the ell of the old log house, the first thing they saw was a man lying beside an empty water pail near the dog kennel. Wakened by the thud of hoofs, the man sat up and started to stutter. It was half-witted Rucker. About his neck had been riveted the dog chain that had last been used to hold the she-wolf.

From his confused and broken talk Mary managed to make out that immediately after the starting of the chuck-wagon for town Hooch Huggins and Mex Chavez had playfully chained him to the kennel to act as watch dog. Hooch had then brought him a bucket of water, and had ridden off westward



with his Mexican mate. They had taken along two of the best Seven Up horses, packed with Seven Up camp supplies.

Mary fed the ravenously hungry man and started to file the chain from his neck. Kiowa had hastened off on a round of barn, corrals and bunk-house. As she came back the sound of galloping hoofs sent her left hand darting to the butt of her ancient Colt.

Joe loped his mare around the end of the house and flung himself off in a flying dismount. As he landed beside Mary her grandmother recognized the two riders who swung past the ell after him. Her hand dropped away from the six-shooter. Joe had paid no more heed to her than if she had been a post. He stood stiffly erect, staring into the startled eyes of Mary.

"That message you gave Limpy?" he demanded. "Was it straight?"

Mary's heart was in her throat. She swallowed hard.

"I—I'm sorry, Joe—really and truly. I——"

"Say," broke in Kiowa. "Just a minute, young man, 'fyou can spare the time. First thing, I want to know what you come trailing us for. Let me tell you, right off, we ain't hankering for rustlers and homiciders 'round here."

Joe went white.

"You're a woman, Aunt Ki—else I'd make you eat those lies, if I had to pound you to a jelly. Too much is enough. I've stood all I'm going to stand from you or anyone. I let you know your own rid-

ers were misbranding your calves — and you call me a rustler. I told you and the rest of the jury I didn't shoot Uncle Lor, and ——”

“Well, then, who d'you say did shoot him? Parl? He planted the silencer on you, didn't he? I know you loaned it to him.”

“Parl?” Joe's eyes widened with astonishment. “Why, Parl had no reason to do it. Uncle Lor had made the new will all in his favor — and Parl couldn't have been mad at me on account of Mary. I was going away, to Arizona. Nor could he have shot Uncle Lor. He was already in with him on business deals. No, all I can guess is that Hooch must have come in the night and sneaked Parl's rifle and the silencer. He was sore at Uncle Lor and at me, too. He could have planted the silencer on me when he hit me and took my gun. I don't wonder at him doing it. But for you to take advantage of being on the jury to brand me a liar and killer!”

“Now, now, boy, don't go off at half-cock. Didn't we turn you loose? Besides, nobody blames you a-tall, and — wait. I ain't finished my say. I'm agreeable you should put it on Hooch, 'fyou can make it stick. Him and his greaser side-kick ought to be strung up, anyhow. I back up 'bout you rustling. The joke's on me. Minute I left for town, that pair of lying hossthieves chained up Rocker here, and skipped out with at least two my bronchos, packed heavy with Seven Up supplies. Stands to reason they likewise took along a bunch of calves.”

Limpy saw fit to differ with this conjecture.

“More like, a bunch of prime steers, Aunt Ki. Calves couldn’t stand a hurry-up over the mountains. Reckon them two bad *hombres* are right smart at brand-blotting.”

Kiowa jerked a crumpled letter from her pocket and thrust it at Joe.

“I caw, sonny. Only I figger ’twas Parl had it coming to him, ’stead of Lor. I figger ’twas him put ’em up to the rustling. Look at this.”

Joe opened the letter and read it through with careful slowness.

“So — it’s done. I meant to warn you that day, but you wouldn’t believe me about the rustling. Now it’s too late. What they’ve bought from the Board is every acre of your leased hay land, isn’t it?”

“A-huh. But what d’you mean by ‘they’? It was Parl done it.”

“Uncle Lor must have put up most of the cash.”

The old cow-woman’s eyes glittered.

“Makes me double glad I got you loose, Joe. Figgered Parl wouldn’t mind you being corraled at cañon, ’count of Mary. Got this notification letter before the trial. It made me hopping mad. That’s why I got what pointers I could out of Swede and Limpy and horned into the jury box.”

“You what?”

“I let Parl hear me spill around how you ought to be sent to the pen. Thereby I got put on the panel and picked for the jury.”

Joe’s ruddy brown eyes reddened.

“You did that? — to brand me a killer!”



"Lord, no. 'Twas to spite Parl. You've no kick coming, sonny. Right now you'd be on your way to the pen 'f I hadn't headed off them fool he-jurors. They was all dead set on voting you guilty—all 'cept one, and he was a weak sister. No, I got you off. Wanted to spill Parl. I own up now, owing to this Hooch and Mex deal, I ain't sorry I pulled you out of the slough."

Joe had turned to look at Mary. He again faced her grandmother, this time without heat.

"You'll be needing riders. Limpy and Swede have quit the Circle B. They're going with me to Arizona. If you like, we'll stop over until after the round-up."

"You're hired," said Kiowa. "First thing, I'll ask you to hit the trail of them sneaking hossthieves. Unload the wagon. Mary, you hustle supper. The boys'll want to turn in soon, so's to get an early start in the morning."

## CHAPTER XVII

### OUT-PLAYED

**B**EFORE supper was over Joe had learned that employment by Aunt Ki did not necessarily mean friendliness. He was given no chance to see Mary alone, either that evening or the next morning.

On the second day he and Limpy and Swede found where the pair of rustlers had rounded up half a hundred or more steers for the brand-blotting. From there the trail skirted south along the foot of the high mountains into the Circle B range.

Morning of the third day the trackers met the stolen Seven Up horses drifting back towards home. Farther south, near the lower drift fence of the Circle B, the driven bunch of steers had been allowed to scatter. They had mingled with Parlen's cattle, and the tracks of the rustlers' horses disappeared as if the bronchos had taken wing. Fresher tracks showed where other riders had bunched a herd of perhaps two hundred steers and driven them eastward.

At the nearest stock-chute on the railroad the tenderfoot station master told his inquisitive visitors that Mr. Parlen Brent's men had loaded and shipped several carloads of cattle. He knew little about brands. So far as he had noticed, all the animals were marked with a B in an O. He could recall

nothing about slits or cuts in their ears. His records gave the shipment as only a hundred and sixty-three cattle.

Joe telegraphed the Denver Stockyards, and learned that the Circle B shipment of steers had arrived o. k.—one hundred and sixty-three head, none with slit left ears or any indication of brand-blotting.

“It’s no use, kid,” said Limpy. “Parl’s got away with it. He could’ve unloaded our steers at the first watering-stop. Or, more like, he shipped ’em separate to some other stockyards, under another name. Easy ’nough to’ve fixed it with this here measly dude station wrangler. Le’s see.”

Looking into the muzzle of Limpy’s forty-five, the tenderfoot went white. Yet he stoutly denied knowledge of any wrongdoing.

Joe headed for the Circle B.

Parlen was very busy, directing six of his men in preparations for the beef round-up. None of the punchers, however, were too busy to knock off work when they saw the visitors. Their boss greeted his cousin with a show of bland pleasure.

“Glad to see you, Joe. Hope this means you’ve come to act as my foreman. I promised Mary I’d take you on.”

Joe smiled back cheerfully.

“Strange she didn’t mention it. But I suppose she thought I was wanted more on the Seven Up. We just dropped in to take up a little collection for Aunt Ki—say, five dozen head of prime steers and



a pair of sneaking coy — Here they are now! Howdy, Hooch. *Buenos dias*, Mex. You're just in time. You're wanted by the Seven Up for brand-blotting and rustling."

"How do you make that out?" mildly inquired Parlen.

"Trail's plain as Hooch's mug," put in Limpy.

Parlen looked surprised.

"Surely you can't mean the trail of those Circle B renegades that drifted up into the Yamparos? Hooch and Mex ran them down out of the hills without waiting for the round-up. Long as Limpy and Swede had quit, I decided to take on these accommodating punchers. Let me know when you find any legal proof of your charges against them. Until then they stay on the Circle B. Have you anything to say?"

"Yes. Bill ought to hold the muzzle of Uncle Lor's old scattergun higher. I filed the triggers last time I went out for sage hens. Come on, Swede. Limpy votes with me it's time to trot along."

The visitors jogged off abreast, with ants crawling up and down their spines. Parlen hesitated. So simple and open a method was against his nature. For the lynching he could have given the old vigilante excuse of having caught a murderer red-handed. His work at the trial had been under cover. This was a different situation. Unless shot dead, Joe would whirl and shoot back — and he would not aim first at Bill. Parlen ordered Bill to lower the shotgun.

Back at the Seven Up Limpy added his say to Joe's laconic report of the failure.

"We're up ag'in' it, Aunt Ki. No proof that'll hold water in the courts. Parl's no slouch when it comes to slick work. As for them dodgasted brand-blotters, you'd 'a' backed up your ownself, with Bill itching to turn loose them two barrels of buckshot."

Kiowa stopped boring the three with her gimlet eyes.

"Well, I reckon I'll keep you boys on. Guess you'll do for round-up work, even 'fyou are no 'count at tracking—or calling a bluff."

Joe swallowed the old woman's ingratitude, and led off in the hard task of combing the hills. Not in many years had the Seven Up gone into the round-up with three such thorough and energetic riders. They cleaned out valleys far back in, where the Yamparos merged with the high sierra. The result was a bunch of wild renegades, many of them mavericks from two to five years old.

Here was gain enough to offset the loss of the rustled steers. Kiowa relaxed a little from her resentment against her new riders. But she kept as close watch as ever over her granddaughter. On the few brief occasions that Joe had any chance to talk with Mary, he was held in check by the old woman's sharp gaze. Mary seemed friendly yet rather reserved.

The work gave him no time to brood, or even to make plans. Having combed the main part of the hills, the riders circled around north and east, with

the ranch for their bunching-ground. This kept everyone on the jump until the regular time for meeting the Circle B outfit down at the divide. Kiowa did not even trouble to reply when Joe suggested that Mary be left at home. For more reasons than one, she wanted the girl along.

The morning after her outfit reached the divide bunching-ground, Kiowa, for the first time in years, did not ride out with her men. Unable to keep away from Mary, Parlen ventured to ride over from his camp alone. He calculated that by this time the girl's grandmother would have sufficiently realized the situation to be ready for bargaining. He was not mistaken.

To Kiowa Orton the Seven Up had long since become no less a part of her being than the flesh on her bones. She could no more part with it than she could have allowed her body to be torn in two. The Circle B now owned her hay land. Though she might be able to carry over this coming winter, the next one would spell ruin to the Seven Up unless she could provide feed for her herd.

As Parlen came into sight she talked to Mary in a way that won the visitor a subdued but not unfriendly greeting from the girl. He and Kiowa then rode up the ridge above the camp to bargain in private.

The result was a truce, if not a treaty of peace, between the Circle B and the Seven Up. The terms were known only to the two owners. But the Circle B riders suddenly ceased dropping casual remarks



about neckties and forked verdicts. Friction was further saved by the care taken by Hooch Huggins and Mex Chavez to keep clear of the Seven Up camp and to avoid Kiowa and her riders as much as possible in the round-up work.

For the dozen or so Circle-B-branded calves that were brought in with Seven Up cows, Parlen had an equal number of calves of his own cows branded with the Seven Up. Even Kiowa said nothing about the "mistakes" that had been made.

Made desperate by his cousin's frequent visits to Kiowa's camp, Joe at last adopted wolf-hunting tactics to see Mary alone. He doubled back and slipped through the trees that encircled the camp on three sides, when Kiowa rode across the creek with Parlen to look at an incoming bunch of cows. At sight of her stealthy visitor Mary's eyes widened with alarm.

"Oh—Oh, Joe!" she gasped. "Gran'ma will be cross. Hurry off quick—before she comes back."

"Not till you tell me something," replied Joe. "I can't stand it any longer. She's set on making you marry Parl!"

Mary's eyes flashed with indignation.

"She's not. Anyway, I won't! It's only she says I must be neighborly with him, because he's trying to play square. He's admitted that Hooch and Mex may have brand-blotted those steers, in order to curry favor with him, and he's promised to pay her for them if he finds proof they did it. Another thing, he's promised to lease the hay land to Gran'ma."

“He has?”

“Yes. You see, he — Oh, there’s Gran’ma coming back. Please, please go! She’ll discharge you — send you away!”

Joe ducked back into the border of the young spruces on the upper side of the camp.

“All right, Mary. I’ll go because I want to stay. If she and Parl don’t try to rush you into it, I’m going to wait till I can save up for ——”

The nearness of his returning boss sent him sprinting back through the dense growth of spruces to his hidden horse. Kiowa found her granddaughter demurely mixing pie crust.

For the remainder of the round-up Joe worked even harder than before. No one could have done more to win the favor of his boss. Even Kiowa grudgingly acknowledged his faithful service.

At the end of the round-up Parlen got in a fine stroke by offering Joe, in the presence of Mary, top pay if he would become foreman of the Circle B. Joe grinned, and spoke of Arizona. The two outfits parted in seeming friendliness.

The bluff about Arizona, backed up by Joe’s apparent indifference to Mary, succeeded even with Kiowa. When the outfit reached the Seven Up ranch, Kiowa offered to keep him on all winter, along with Limpy and Swede. He said something about Arizona being pleasanter in cold weather, but permitted himself to be persuaded.

Kiowa sent him to town with a sealed envelope addressed to the bank, and checks for his own and

his friends' wages. The checks were a surprise to him. Before the divide round-up the old cow-woman had repeatedly complained that she was out of funds. This time he did not buy Mary a fancy saddle. He opened a savings account.

After the round-up the work on the Seven Up settled down to a comparatively easy routine. Yet Kiowa saw to it that her men did little idling. Their main work was to keep the beef cattle out of the hills. For, having in some manner raised enough money to meet running expenses, Kiowa held off her shipment of steers.

Close upon Christmas came a jump in the livestock market. Kiowa then sold off everything that would pass as beef, from yearlings to the old steers combed out of the back cañons of the Yamparos. Though stripped down to cows and young calves, the Seven Up, for the first time in years, now stood upon a firm cash basis.

By this time Kiowa had begun to relax her vigilance over Mary. The girl and Joe seemed to have settled down to a matter-of-fact friendship. Neither one showed a trace of any deeper feeling.

During the long winter evenings that followed, Swede and Rucker spent all their leisure playing checkers, while Limpy carried on endless arguments with Kiowa over range matters. Mary put in every minute sewing, yet at the same time helped Joe with his studies. What little "schooling" he and Parlen had received on the Circle B had been picked up in this same manner during winter evenings.



Taylor Brent had seen fit to work his nephews the year around. As for paying their board in town during the school term, that of course had been altogether out of the question. But as a big taxpayer, he had demanded his nephews' full share of books from the school district, and the boys had dug out of them an irregular yet fairly good education. They had learned fewer facts than the school taught, but their reasoning faculties had been exceptionally well developed by the necessity of thinking out all problems for themselves.

Joe was now so intent upon working out the biggest problem of his life that he had no time to sigh over Mary or cast sheep's eyes at her. By the end of February Kiowa had almost forgotten that he had once threatened to be a serious obstacle to her plans. When he asked for his winter's pay, she drew him a check without hesitation.

As he folded the slip and put it carefully into the pocket of his leather vest Mary quietly left her sewing and came to stand at his elbow. He took her hand in a firm clasp.

"We want to break the news, Aunt Ki," he said. "Mary is going to town with me. We have decided that we've waited long enough. I've saved all but five dollars of my wages this time, and——"

"Decided! What you talking 'bout?"

"To get married, Gran'ma," answered Mary. "You must have known how it's been with Joe and me all along—only I was so frightfully mistaken and mean to him about that wolf. Please, Gran'ma,

don't be angry. You know you like him ever so much yourself."

Kiowa was too astonished to burst into a fury. But her tongue dripped cold venom.

"So this is what I get for picking up a froze rattler and warming him in my bosom. This is what's been going on right under my nose. Well, let me tell you, Joe Gale: You can go to town—alone. And you can keep right on a-going. Plumb to Arizona! No, you sew up your lip. My gran'daughter ain't going to hitch up with no shiftless, shooting son of a shiftless no 'count drunkard. Get out and stay out!"

"But Gran'ma——"

"Shut up! Idee you thinking of lowering yourself to marry a cheap cowboy that ain't got a cow to his name—when you can have the biggest owner in the Yamparo country. Stop that crying and go to bed, or I'll tan your hide with a quirt. Joe Gale, I told you to git!"

Joe had been looking steadily into Mary's grief-stricken face. He turned and went out into the night.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### YOUTH AGAINST AGE

**A**N HOUR before dawn Kiowa was wakened by the howl of a wolf. For many months nothing had been seen or heard of Splay Foot on the Seven Up. The murderous she-wolf seemed to have left the Yamparos. But this unutterable dismal howl roused old Kiowa quicker than the scream of a mountain lion.

She jumped into her winter clothes, grabbed her rifle, and ran across to the bunk-house. At her call, Limpy and Swede fumbled their way out into the dim starlight. But Joe did not follow. She demanded to know why. Limpy mumbled something about the kid having headed for town.

Kiowa tartly ordered the men to circle around the feed lot with her, on the chance of surprising the wolf. But they had not yet reached the barn when the desolate howl of the gray prowler came quavering out of the blackness in the east.

“Huh!” sniffed Kiowa. “If that’s Splay Foot, I reckon she’s tagging after that no ’count ornery young cuss. Hope she follows him all the way to Arizony.”

Swede, as usual, was silent, and Limpy, for once, had no more to say than his big side-kick.

Kiowa went in to start the kitchen fire. Dawn was



too near for her to go back to bed. She drew up her rocker to the stove and sat brooding. Good thing the boy had cleared out. Mary would now be easy to handle. Too bad the girl had taken such a fancy to the young scalawag. Her own fault. She might have known how it would turn out.

The boy was mighty likable. If only Lor Brent had willed him the Circle B, instead of leaving it to Parlen—yes, if only he had left the boy a half interest—or even less! But no use crying over spilt milk. She must take care of her granddaughter and the Seven Up. Besides, it was now settled for good. The boy had hit out for Arizona.

Dawn had already begun to pink the ghostly snow peaks of the high mountains. The chill gray underlight was creeping down upon the black crags of the Yamparos. Kiowa stuffed more billets of wood into the stove and went to rouse Mary.

Just by way of precaution, she had locked the door of Mary's room. She turned the key and called for the girl to roll out. There was no answer. She flung the door open and struck a match. No sign of Mary. The bed had not been used.

She had not considered the little slide window. It had seemed too small for even herself to crawl through. She had failed to take into account Mary's girlish slenderness.

Red dawn found her ready for the road. She hop-mounted the broncho saddled for her by Swede and started off at an easy jog. She was far too old a hand at long-distance racing to put her horse into

a lope before he had been warmed up.

The broncho had still to quicken out of the jog when a patch of snow on the town road told his rider she had struck the trail. It told her more. The previous day had been warm, the night cold. The hoof prints of the two horses were stamped deep in the white surface. The elopers had started off so early in the night that the slushy snow had not yet frozen.

Running along with the hoof prints were slight scratches on the hardened surface. One set of scratches was wide-spread. Its claw-marks had been made by the huge splayed left forepaw of Splay Foot. Kiowa found herself wondering. Why had the she-wolf howled and followed the trail of the runaways? Had she been drawn by love or by hate—by the scent of the man who had harmed her, or the scent of the girl who twice had saved her from death?

But the vengeful old woman had little thought to spare on speculations over the vagaries of wolf nature. She put her broncho into a gallop. The elopers may have counted too much upon their long start. By hard riding she might overtake them before they reached town, or at least before the ceremony. She calculated the very utmost that her horse could give her, and pushed him to the limit.

The road and even the cut-offs were in good condition for fast riding. Joe had chosen his time when a dry spell and a two weeks' February thaw had cleared the lower country of all snow except an occa-

sional shallow drift. Kiowa made a record run.

Yet mercilessly as she spurred her broncho, she was still a long mile from town when a sharp turn around a spur of rocks brought her suddenly face to face with those whom she sought. They were coming back from town.

Her jerk on the curb bit threw her broncho on his haunches between the astonished couple. But, for all his surprise, Joe lost none of his quickness. He twisted the partly drawn Colts out of the hand of the furious old woman.

"'Scuse me, Gran'ma," he said. "It's too soon for Mary to become a widow."

Kiowa turned her back on him, to glare at her granddaughter.

"You—you! Run off and married him, have you?"

"Oh, Gran'ma, please, please forgive us! You know I couldn't help it. We'd have waited, if only you hadn't made Joe leave."

"Huh! Glad you ain't forgot that. I told him to get out—for good. You chose to go with him. You've made your bed. Now you can lie on it. I'm done with you. Don't you ever again darken my door. You're no longer kith or kin of Kiowa Orton. I don't own nary granddaughter who has no more gumption than to hitch up with a sneaky, shiftless, rustling *killer!*"

Mary's face whitened. Her eyes suddenly went dry. She turned her horse and started back to town. Joe paused only to shell the cartridges out of the



Colts and hand the ancient weapon back to its owner.

Until the young couple passed from sight Kiowa sat her panting broncho as if turned to stone. She rode on into town at a walk. For the first time in her long hard life she was close upon physical and mental collapse. She went to bed at the house of the friend with whom she and Mary had stayed during Joe's trial.

Though she tossed through a night of feverish broken sleep, morning found her tough old body partly recovered from that killing race against time. Her rage had lulled. She thought of what life would be without Mary, out there on the lonely range. The thought added fuel to her hatred of the young man who had stolen the girl away from her. But she could not resist her yearning. She sent out her friend to fetch the girl.

The woman came back alone. All she had been able to learn was that Joe had drawn his money from the bank and ridden off southwards with Mary. The hotel keeper, however, had made his guess that the young couple were heading for Arizona.

Kiowa did not flare into another rage. She saddled her still tired and stiff broncho and broke off homewards, outwardly resigned to her loss. Her anger had burned itself to ashes. But the ashes held all the acrid bitterness of unforgiving rancor.

She now hated even Mary. The girl had deserted her, to throw in with that treacherous, sneaking, two-faced young skunk. She had ruined her own chances for a prosperous future, and at the same time had

cut off all chance of saving the Seven Up. Parlen had agreed to lease the hay lands — on one condition. Now the girl had made fulfillment of that condition impossible.

Even at that, there was a shadow of an excuse to be made for her. After all, she was only a girl — a girl in love. Though she should not have been so utterly disobedient and ungrateful, still a little allowance had to be made on account of her love for that fellow. She was young and she loved him.

But as for him! The old woman's overflowing venom poisoned her soul. He had spoiled all her plans. She called upon God to curse him.

## CHAPTER XIX

### THE LASH

**H**AD Kiowa followed the couple to the nearest government land office, she might have learned that they had other plans than a trip to Arizona.

Both Joe and Mary had been born and reared in the Yamparo country. It was their home land. Parlen, in like circumstances, would have drifted away, following the line of least resistance. But they were held by the Yamparos almost as fast as was old Kiowa.

They made their venture, clear-eyed to all the hardship and strife that it was bound to bring upon them. Knowing the odds against them, they took care to keep their plans and movements to themselves. Possession was nine points of the law.

Neither Parlen nor Kiowa had the slightest inkling what was taking place until, at the usual time, they brought their outfits to the divide for the spring round-up.

Kiowa and her men were first to arrive. They found their way barred by a wire fence. The fence enclosed a mile length of creek-bottom meadow and the best part of the bunching-ground.

Limpy had all the old-time range rider's contempt for nesters. He rode ahead of the chuck-wagon to



cut the fence. Kiowa drove through and down to her favorite camp ground. It was the sheltered nook on the creek bank where she had camped year after year. On all sides except the south it was walled in by dense growths of aspens, pines and blue spruce.

Atop the high bank, where the rill of the best spring within miles tumbled over into the creek, stood a new log cabin. A man and woman with shovels were covering the last unfinished corner of the brush-and-dirt roof. An alert collie dog ran out to bark warning. The man and woman dropped their shovels and came forward to meet the visitors.

Kiowa had already recognized the nesters. Her left hand went back to her hip. Joe grinned and held up his right hand, palm forward, in the old Indian sign for a peace talk.

"Hold on, Aunt Ki," he called. "I'm not heeled. You can't call it self-defense. Limpy and Swede will back the testimony of Mary."

The old woman drove forward and jerked her team to a halt close before the young couple. She stared down at Joe, perversely heedless of the appealing gaze of Mary.

"You miser'ble squatter," she shrilled. "I'll give you just the time to get off my range that it takes a top-hand to rope his hoss and saddle-up. There ain't going to be any second warning."

Joe's grin widened.

"You done said something, Aunt Ki. You'll savvy a second warning is useless—when you hear that

this isn't your range. Happens, it's my homestead. I've taken it up in a string of forties that straddle the creek."

"Do tell!" scoffed Kiowa. "Reckon you're an owner now, do you? How many head d'you figger to graze on your hundred-and sixty, 'fyou'll allow me to ask?"

"No more than you think, Aunt Ki. This is only my hay land. My desert land claim is the dry bench down here south of the creek. My timber and stone claim runs up here along the south ridge. I'm waiting for you to thank me. By the time I get all my land fenced, Parl's cows won't be so apt to drift across onto the Seven Up and cut down your grass."

The last statement stayed Kiowa's tongue, but only for a moment.

"You don't softsawder me with any such hornswoggling. Nobody's asked you to meddle betwixt me and Parl Brent. What's more, all this here divide has been Seven Up range since it was Injin country. You mark my word, it'll be might healthy for you to get off it, and get sudden."

Joe's grin hardened into grim sternness.

"That's enough, Mrs. Orton. You're not going to bluff me. This was public domain. It still is public range except what's now my private land. If you want to law me, go ahead and sue. If you want to try running me off, start your fireworks. My holster is empty. I can't gun-fight a woman. Go ahead and murder me. You're trespassing on my legal homestead claim and you cut my fence, both

of which are against the law. Now go ahead and shoot me."

Kiowa tightened the reins and started to swing her team around. Joe's close-set lips relaxed in a good-natured smile.

"Wait a minute, Aunt Ki. Mary and I'd be glad to have you put up with us. Yes, and you're welcome to use our land for your bunching-ground. The fence will save you the need of a man to ride herd. I'll join in with Limpy and Swede without pay, Aunt Ki, if only you'll let Mary——"

"Bah!" derided Kiowa. "Choke off that blatt."

She caught the wagon whip from its socket. Mary ran in past the heads of the horses, her hands upstretched.

"Gran'ma!" she appealed. "Don't go — don't! If only you'll——"

"Get out of the way," snapped Kiowa.

The whip swished in a vicious stroke. She may have intended only to strike the off horse. Not improbably she expected Mary to dodge. The girl stood as if frozen. The whip curved around her upraised left arm and lashed across her face.

Joe saw red. Only the jump between of Limpy's horse and the quick-following clutch of Swede's big hands kept him from dragging Kiowa off the wagon seat. Startled by the commotion, the half-broken team started to run away. Kiowa had all she could do to head them back to the gap in the fence.

Limpy lingered for an awkward attempt at consolation.



"Don't you mind, Miss Mary. She didn't aim for to do it. You know she didn't. She'll shy clear from now on. And me and Swede'll do our durndest to shoo off the Circle B."

"No, you won't!" shouted Joe. "I'll take no help from *her* men. Go mend my fence and clear out. I'll shoot on sight anybody I catch cutting my wires."

"Don't blame you, kid—getting all het up. Don't blame you a-tall. Leave him go, Swede. Aunt Ki's got a safe start on him. S'long, Miss Mary. Try to hold him down, 'fyou can. That Circle B bunch'll be hankering for a 'scuse to act ornery."

"Tell 'em they're welcome to try—sooner the better," said Joe.

His look sent Limpy and Swede riding off with sober faces.

The old top-rider took upon himself to ride south until he met the up-bound Circle B outfit. The news he brought acted upon most of the punchers like a red flag on a bull. But Parlen weighed it with care and gave cool judgment.

"Don't forget what he did down at the ranch, that time he threatened to shoot me and Uncle Lor. He'll be on the lookout for us, and he still has his silencer. It won't be any stand-up-and-face-us fight. He'll do it again Indian fashion, from cover. Limpy is right. You have my orders to shy him and his fence."

When the Circle B outfit reached the divide, Kiowa listened to the decision of their owner with bitter

contempt. However, she made no objection to the location of the new bunching-ground a full mile down-creek from the nester's lower fence.

On the second day, while Kiowa and all the hired hands were off in the hills, Parlen followed a set of team and wheel tracks that he knew had not been made by his own or the Seven Up chuck outfit. The tracks led him to a wire gate in the fence, across the creek from the new cabin. The distance was not too great for him to make out Mary completing the dirt cover of the cabin roof. He could see nothing of Joe.

But as he started to unhook the gate, a bullet *pinged* low over his head. No report of the shot followed. He flung himself into his saddle and spurred his thoroughbred horse around the nearest rocky point. No second bullet followed.

He said nothing about his balked venture. But that afternoon Bill came in with a thirty-two caliber bullet hole through the peak of his fo'gallon hat. He loudly demanded vengeance upon "the cussed skulking 'sassin." All that he had done was follow a bunch of cows that swung in close to the homestead. Parlen coldly reminded him of the command to keep clear of the nester's fence. After this every Circle B man took care not to show himself anywhere near Joe's claim.

Kiowa had from the first chosen to do all her riding in the opposite direction. Not that she was afraid of Joe. But she could not get out of her mind's eye the vision of Mary's white face, streaked

across like a wound by the scarlet welt of the whip lash. The girl must believe that her grandmother had purposely struck her. It was all Joe's fault! Kiowa's rancor against him became still more acrid.

Even Swede and Limpy circled wide of their friend's homestead when riding up into the hills or driving out cows and steers. But on the last day of the round-up, after the divided herds had been well started in opposite directions, the old top-rider jogged around to the wire gate and held up his right hand.

Mary ran across the tree trunk that had been felled for a bridge, and hurried up the slope to the visitor.

"Wh-what is it?" she panted. "Is Parl going to rush us?"

"Not him—it's daylight," answered Limpy. "No, I just got a leetle business with the kid, Miss Mary. Your grandma's outfit and Parl's 've all headed for home."

Mary waved her apron up-creek towards a high crag that gave a commanding view of all the homestead and its borders. The lame old puncher tied his horse to the gate post and hobbled beside Mary down to the creek. As they crossed the bridge log, Joe came out of the spruce trees up-stream. On the muzzle of his rifle was the Maxim silencer. Limpy met his none-too-cordial look with a half-toothless smile.

"Howdy, kid. Still on the warpath, huh?"

"Needn't tell me your news," replied Joe. "I saw



them pull out. But I trust Parl and his bunch no more than her."

Limpy thoughtfully rolled his quid.

"Um-m-m— I figger all she's hankering for is someun else to do the hazing. 'Twon't be Parl. He's too fond of his hide. Mebbe some his bunch'll sidle up thisaway—after they figger you done stopped looking out for 'em. Then ag'in, mebbe they won't. They got a sort of notion a thirty-two with a silencer is mighty bad med'cine."

At sight of Joe's smile, Mary broke her silence.

"You'll stay and eat with us. I'll have something on in a jiffy."

"No'um. Can't stop. D'want to rile your gramma. Lost my wad last night, so's I could come back and look for it."

The old puncher unbuckled his hollow cartridge belt and began to shake into his hat gold pieces and long, tight folds of bank notes.

"Been saving up for a coon's age," he explained. "Always had a idee, kid, your uncle might throw you. 'Tain't bad having a stake when you got a fam'ly and 're starting out to become a owner. Swede chipped in his last wages."

Joe's face lost its last trace of harshness.

"You old son-of-a-gun! But you know I can't take it. I'm counting on getting a job as Government hunter till I can prove up on my land claims. Fact is, killing Gotch Ear and catching Splay Foot put me in good with the Association. I've got the job cinched."

"Shucks, kid; you'll never get anywheres just hunting. Tell you what. Use this here wad to buy you a bunch of stockers. That'll give you a start-off. 'Fyou want, you can figger me in as a sort of silent pard. What say?"

"No go. Like Uncle Lor, Parl is keeping the divide over-stocked. He'll throw on still more head if I try to graze even half a hundred cows."

"Come to think, kid, I reckon you're right. But if you can't look for no grazing, what's the use you nesting here?"

The hard look came back into Joe's eyes.

"For one thing, this is my claim. I'm going to prove up on it. For another thing, I intend to buck Parl and — her — to the limit. They'd soon starve out a bunch of cows. But how about — sheep?"

The old cowboy's mouth gaped.

"Sheep?" he mumbled, "sheep? You? A measly sheep-herder!"

"Owner," corrected Joe. He grinned. "How long will they run cows on the divide after I start to graze a few hundred woolies?"

"Lord! You gone plumb loco, kid? Aunt Ki and Parl'll throw fits 'fyou bring one single sol'tary lone sheep in sight of the Yamparos. They ain't never been no sheep nowhere on this here range. It's cow country — cow!"

"So was all Wyoming. Now it's pretty much all wool, the state wide. We'll be next. Think of all those flocks over on the dry mesa country east of town."

"You done said it, kid — dry. Not 'nough water out thataway for cows. Plenty over here. This is cow range."

"It's public range, open to all comers. I talked with more than one sheepman before filing on these claims. Sheep are my one best bet to beat the game against Parl and her. Belt up your wad. I'm not asking you to turn sheep owner."

Limpy mumbled his quid and spat nervously. He had been born and reared in the cow country. To him and his like, sheep were more to be hated than gray wolves. For Joe to go over to the enemy was little short of treachery. Only thing, the kid had been given a crooked deal by his uncle and Aunt Ki — and he, Limpy, had as good as reared him; had been a foster-father to him. He gulped.

"I can't do it, kid — y'know I can't. Just the smell of mutton makes me sick to my stummick. I can't throw in with you. On'y, my wad stays put. Call it a loan 'fyou like. S'long." The gold and bank notes dropped out of the overturned hat. "S'long, Miss Mary. Sorry I can't stop for chuck. Aunt Ki ain't even in sight of your dust when it comes to cooking. No, I won't take back nary a cent, kid. Dump it in the crik 'fyou don't want to use it."

He was already crossing the foot-log. He limped rapidly off up the slope.

Mary knelt down to gather the bank notes in her apron before they could blow away.

"The old dear! Look, Joe. Most of them are



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twenties—and here's a bunch of fifties. We'll be able to buy quite a flock."

Joe lowered his troubled eyes from the small figure limping hurriedly up to the gate.

"I don't care," he muttered. "It's on them—her and Uncle Lor and Parl. They ought to have played fair."

## CHAPTER XX

### SHEEP

ALMOST two months later Parlen came alone to the Seven Up ranch. He found Kiowa cooking supper and in none too amiable a mood.

"What you nosing in here for now?" she demanded. "You've got my hay land, and your no 'count cousin's got my girl. Ain't nothing left but the soup bones."

"Don't go and get all riled up for nothing, Aunt Ki," he soothed. "I'm going to Denver on some business that I'd like to talk over with you. It concerns us both."

"As how?"

Parlen looked at Mary's fancy saddle. It still hung from the peg in the far corner of the log walls where the girl had put it when Joe brought the gift home to her. The months that had passed since then seemed ages to Parlen.

"Isn't that the way with girls?" he muttered. "Let a reckless fool squander all he has on them, and they can't so much as see a man with ten times as much."

"Ten times?" scoffed Kiowa. "You're owner of the Circle B, and he's got only his piddling claims. It's more like a hundred to nothing."

As Parlen started to reply, Limpy, Swede and

Rocker silently filed in for supper. They eyed the visitor with the blank look of polite hostility. He started to talk about the condition of the range. But when, at the end of the meal, the punchers went out to the bunk-house, he lingered in the lamp-lit kitchen.

"About that hundred to nothing proposition, Aunt Ki," he remarked. "You may not have heard what he's doing."

"Started a skunk farm, I reckon. Just like him to hanker for congen'al comp'ny."

"Guess again. Didn't you notice he had a col-lie?"

"Well, say it. I ain't lost my ears."

"Sheep," said Parlen.

Kiowa's hawk eyes glittered.

"Sheep? Aw, come off. You're trying to string me. Why, he wouldn't have the gall. Anyhow, he didn't have money enough left to get any, after buying his outfit. 'Sides, he was raised on cow. You can't string me. *Sheep!*"

"Go look for yourself. I don't know how he got them. Maybe he's only herding for one of the big flock masters over in the mesa country. They may think they can crowd into the Yamparos, and shove off the cows. It would be like Joe to do the dirty work for them, just to spite us."

"You ain't fooling—honest now, Parl? Lord! if he's had the nerve to bring in one sheep—"

"Two hundred head, at least, Aunt Ki. Only a starter, as flocks go. But you've heard how cattle



won't range with sheep. I didn't see a cow or steer anywhere on the divide. Worse still, where those sheep have grazed they've made a clean sweep—grass cut down to the roots."

Suspicion of her visitor's motives kept Kiowa's rancor from flaring into rage. She asked sourly:

"Well, what you going to do 'bout it?"

"That's what I came to tell you, Aunt Ki. It's as much your interest as mine to stop him. I'm going to Denver to ask an A-one lawyer if we can't get out an injunction. If not, I thought we might throw in together and lease the land around his claims. We wouldn't have to renew the leases after he's been frozen out."

Kiowa's face went wry.

"Heap of money I've got to put into leases on grazing land! You know, well's me, I won't have a steer this fall for the beef market, and you know how I loaded up on stockers last April. Held back only 'nough cash to pay you for the hay land leases you promised me."

"Oh, yes, that promise. I aim to be a man of my word, Aunt Ki. Only don't forget you've fallen down on your side of the deal. You let our kid sheep-herder rustle what was coming to me."

"'Twasn't my fault. Just you go look at that window in her room. Tight squeeze for a chip-munk! Anyway, how'd I know he could be slick as you, keeping it under his hat thataway?"

Parlen took this rather as a compliment, but was not to be diverted.

"I stand ready to deliver when you do. It's some time yet before you'll need that hay. He hasn't lost his bullheaded recklessness. Something may happen to him even before I get back from Denver."

"As how?"

The pointed question was met by a bland smile.

"Why, I was thinking only of his horse rolling on him; or he might happen to drop his gun wrong end up. The point is, how about your side of the deal, if she's left free?"

"I savvy." Kiowa, in turn, looked at the fancy saddle. "Well, it sort of depends. Mebbe I'll be ready to tell you when you get back."

The set of the old woman's skinny jaw told Parlen that argument would be useless.

He left before dawn on his speedy thoroughbred, determined, for reasons of his own, to catch the train that passed through town in the afternoon.

Kiowa had taken her consideration to the visitor's motives and schemes to bed with her. Shortly after he left she called Limpy into consultation. The lame puncher came with his own surmises as to why Parlen had visited the Seven Up. He was braced for the first sharp query of his lady boss:

"What d'you know 'bout that nester running sheep on my range?"

"Well, if Parl ain't lyin, Aunt Ki——"

"He ain't, but you're all set to. Own up like a little man. You're in cahoots with that—that—sheep-herder!"

"Me? Nope, Aunt Ki. You got me all wrong.

No mutton in mine. I don't have nothing nohow to do with no sheep. I'm a cow-puncher, tooth and toenail, hoofs to hair. 'Fyou want to fire me, go ahead. It's your priv'lege. But you ain't got no call to insult me. Sheep-herder? — *me!*”

The indignation in Limpy's look and voice was too unmistakably genuine to have been shammed. Kiowa grunted and jerked her head.

“Reckon you'll do to take along. Something's liable to happen to a flock of sheep. Just the same, I won't stand for murder. Come and saddle up. We'll leave Rucker. 'Tain't fair running a locoed critter up against trouble. He ain't any use with a gun, anyhow.”

Limpy had no need to ask questions. Parlen had come to rile the old Tartar, and had gone off at a gallop, to establish his alibi. What fault of his if, during his absence, a flock of sheep should be smoked up, or even if some of the Circle B men were forced in self-defense to shoot a sheep-herder?

The pace was set by Kiowa. Swede had dropped a long quarter-mile behind by the time the first steep grades up the hills of the divide slowed the racing bronchos to a jog. By running alongside his horse, Swede overtook the leaders as they cut up the ridge that overlooked the creek.

From the other side of the ridge sounded an uproar of shots and the loud bleating of frightened sheep. A billow of black smoke rolled up against the cloudless sky. Limpy dug his spurs into his broncho's flanks.



"C'mon," he shouted. "The lobos beat us to it."

Kiowa and Swede sprinted over the crest close behind him. No need to stop at the fence. It had been cut in a dozen places. On the opposite rim of the little valley three men were running the panic-stricken flock of sheep towards the higher hills. As they galloped at the heels of the weak laggards they "smoked up" the helpless creatures with rapid shots from their pistols. The heavy mass of smoke was rising from amidst the trees at the old camp site.

Kiowa led the plunge down-slope to the cabin. The racket across the valley drowned the noise of their jumping, slithering, sprinting bronchos. No one barred the way of the newcomers as they swept around into the glade.

Near the largest aspen on the lee side of the burning cabin, two of the Circle B men stood with hands gripped fast on Mary's bare white arms. Her torn sleeves and the mass of golden hair glinting about her shoulders showed how desperately she had struggled. She now sagged exhausted in the clutch of her captors, her despairing gaze fixed upon Joe.

But this time the matter had not gone quite so far as down at the Circle B's south drift fence. Mex Chavez was casting his horsehair *reata* over a branch of an aspen. Hooch Huggins and Bill were dragging Joe up into his wagon, in which Mary's flour barrel had been perched, upside down, upon her kitchen table.

The surprise was not so complete as when Limpy had interrupted the first "necktie party." But sight

of Kiowa in the lead made the Circle B men hesitate over reaching for their guns. They knew that the old woman hated Joe. In that moment of delay they were covered by her ancient Colts and the pistols of Limpy and Swede.

Kiowa disdained even to so much as disarm the lynchers.

"Git!" she cried.

All discreetly made for their horses. Hooch alone, as he mounted, ventured to remonstrate:

"Aw, Aunt Ki, how come? Didn't reckon you was backing no dirty sheep-herder."

"Nor you ain't murdering nobody on my range yet-awhile," retorted the old cow-woman. "You go help run them pesky sheep. I'll run the sheep-herder. Git!"

The vigilantes slithered their horses down the high creek bank and went splattering off aslant the drought-shallowed stream. Mary had already run to untie Joe. He had been badly beaten, but was not dazed. His eyes were already too puffed for him to see. He turned his battered, bleeding face in the direction from which had come the voice of his rescuer. His swollen lips twisted in a humorous grin.

"All you have to do now, Aunt Ki, is beg Mary's pardon, and we'll call it accounts squared."

"Oh, no, no, Gran'ma," cried Mary. "You've saved him. You can whip me now all you like."

Kiowa wheeled her horse to the rear, her withered, wrinkled face twitching convulsively.

"You, Limpy," she shrilled, "you and Swede ride

herd on the pair of 'em to the railroad. From there I figger they can hoof it 'cross to the sheep country — where they belong."

The broncho jumped to the jab of her spurs. She was still scratching him when they dashed from sight around the corner of the trees. Limpy at once took charge.

"Did the lobos run off your hosses, too, kid?"

"They were in the corral," replied Mary. "You might look."

Limpy jerked his thumb at Swede.

"Hop to it. Them sneaky lobos is mighty apt to round back on us. Best if we don't have to ride double."

Swede raced with him past the flaming cabin and through the thicket of young spruce to the corral. The lynchers had been too busy to run off Mary's pony and Joe's mare, or to take the saddles and bridles from the top rail of the corral.

When the two punchers came hastening back with the led horses Mary was bathing Joe's wounds in the spring rill. He raised his drenched head.

"That you, Limpy? I want to tell you, Mary and I aim to begin paying off that loan soon as I get my Government hunter job. I as good as had promise of it from the Biological Survey when you made me the loan."

"Aw, forget it, kid. You and Miss Mary don't owe me nary a red cent. Wasn't I a pard in your outfit? When a outfit goes bust, all pards stand to lose."



"You old liar! You're not a partner. That was a loan. You wouldn't have a thing to do with sheep."

Limpy scratched his head.

"I done reconsidered. Ain't no sheep in it now, nohow. Them lobos is heading the cussed woolies for that there jump-off into the box cañon. Hear 'em still hitting it up, hell-to-leather. Won't be no sheep question left, soon's they run them woolies over the jump-off. It's a sixty-foot drop."

Mary shuddered and threw up her bare arm before her eyes.

"Can't help them sheep going down, ma'am," went on the old puncher. "Nor we can't help a used-to-be sheepman from going *up*, 'fwe don't skip out *muy pronto*."

Swede boosted Joe onto the mare. Joe could not see. But he had only to let the reins hang slack. The mare followed close after Swede's horse. Mary rode behind Joe, to call out warnings of jumps over gulleys and down-timber. Limpy brought up the rear, with a watchful eye over his shoulder.

Half a mile or so below the badly cut lower fence they passed a number of dead and dying sheep. At the far border of the shambles lay the collie, shot in the defense of his charges. Mary cried out for a halt, and sprang off beside the dog. She could not go on without first making sure that he was not lying wounded. But the Circle B raiders had vented their spite on the sheep-herder's friend with deadly thoroughness.

The fugitives did not again slow down from a fast lope until nightfall brought a fair degree of safety from pursuit. As the horses then scuffled along across country in the starlight, Mary told how the Circle B men had crept upon Joe when he was cutting posts for his desert-claim fence.

Miles farther along Limpy made his comment on the matter:

“If Parl hadn’t tried to be so smart in sliding out from under, and getting Aunt Ki in on the lynching, the kid would sure have got hisn. Just happened, Parl was so slick he slipped up on hisself—just like his first try, down at the lower drift fence. All the same, first time was a mighty tight squeeze, and this time was nigh as close. Best let it go at that, kid. Third time’s the charm. Y’know now you can’t buck a big outfit like Parl’s all by your lonesome. Thay’s heaps of range greener than the Yamparos.”

From the darkness ahead Joe’s voice called back with grim cheerfulness:

“They have still to show me I’m a quitter. I’m going to give Parl enough rope to hang himself. Savvy? We stand pat. No bunch of coyotes is going to run us off our land. What say, Mary?”

“It’s our home, even if they have burned the cabin,” rang out the voice of Mary, no less resolute.

## CHAPTER XXI

### ACCOUNTS SETTLED

ONLY a few days later Joe and Mary headed back from the railroad. Joe's appointment as a Government hunter had given him credit for buying wolf traps, two bed-rolls, a new rifle and silencer, a pistol, riding togs for Mary, and enough provisions to complete a heavy pack for the mare.

Though only one at a time could ride, they covered the long miles back to their homestead almost as fast as if both had been mounted. They traveled "ride and tie" according to the very old pioneer practice. One would lope ahead, leave the pony and mare to graze, and walk on. The other, coming up afoot, would mount and, in turn, lope ahead, to jump off and walk again. By this method each alternately had a rest in the saddle, the horses were given time to both eat and rest, and much ground was covered in a day.

When they reached their homestead they found that the raiders, after slaughtering the sheep, had come back to complete the work of destruction. The wagon, with the flour barrel and kitchen table, had been backed alongside the flaming wall of the cabin. The fire-rusted tires and other ironwork showed red amidst the gray ashes and black ends of charred wood.



All the way around the homestead claim the fence wires were cut to pieces. The smaller posts had been snapped off. The spring had been polluted with the carcass of a sheep. The horse corral was now only a high stack of rails and uprooted posts. A charred spot showed where the edge of the pile had been set alight; but the fire, being ill-placed, had failed to spread and burn the stack.

Joe cleaned the spring while Mary cached most of the food in a dry hole part way up the crag that Joe had used for a lookout point. They then built a very small cabin with corral rails and spruce boughs. Set in the midst of the dense spruce thicket, the building was hidden from anyone except a close searcher. Yet when the time should come for Joe to prove up, the little cabin would enable him to swear to continued occupancy of his claims.

During the week that they put in at this work they took care to keep themselves and their horses under cover. Mary was no less determined than Joe to hold the claims. For that very reason she had persuaded him to avoid another raid from the Circle B men. This could be done only by keeping their residence on the land a secret. At the right time they could rely upon Limpy and Swede to act as their witnesses in the proving up.

After finishing their hidden new home, they struck off westwards into the hills. With the lessened pack divided between the two horses, both were able to ride. Joe took care to circle around to windward of the box cañon into which the raiders had driven his

sheep. Fortunately the cañon ran down the south ridge on the side opposite the creek. Otherwise, for a long time to come, the waters of the little stream would have been polluted after every heavy rain.

Well back in the hills Joe set about his work as Government hunter. For months Parlen had been writing bitter complaints to the Association about the continued devastations of Splay Foot. The authorities probably thought the killer of old Gotch Ear a good man to send after her still more murderous daughter. They had granted Joe's request to be assigned to the Yamparo region.

A thorough search north of the divide failed to locate any trace of the she-wolf and her new mate. Joe became convinced that the pair had not yet been run back north since their last shift to the Circle B range. He did not know about that howling of the she-wolf on their trail when he and Mary eloped. As neither he nor Mary had any fancy to come in contact with Parlen or his riders, they kept clear of the Circle B, and roved in and out among the Yamparos, hunting and camping.

The life, though hard, was healthful and interesting. With Mary to cook and help in various other ways, Joe was able to give all his attention to trapping and tracking. They visited their homestead only when short of food. This was not often, for rabbits were plentiful in the hills, and the streams that headed among the snow peaks of the high mountains swarmed with trout. Mary jerked out many messes of speckled beauties with a line of braided

horsehair and a hairpin hook on a leader of catgut made by Joe.

Once they happened to be out of food when Joe jumped a young mountain lion. He had once heard that the old-time trappers preferred cougar meat to all other kinds. At his dare, Mary ventured to cook some. It proved to be the tenderest and best-flavored game they had ever eaten. After this they lived still more on the country, Mary supplementing the meat diet with fireweed, sorrel, king's crown, and other greens.

They found they could go without bacon, sugar and flour, and even coffee. But when their home cache ran short of salt and Joe used up all his rifle cartridges, they had to head for town. With them they took enough coyote, wildcat and mountain lion scalps to prove to the Biological Survey that Joe had been far from idle.

His salary checks were waiting for him at the postoffice. After paying his debts, he could have at once bought a pack-load of supplies and started back for the hills. But Mary needed the rest of a change from camp life. One of her former school chums begged her to stay for a week's visit. They had a delightful six days of sewing on small garments.

Joe spent most of the week at the ranch of a big sheep owner, out east in the dry mesa district. When he came back to town his plans were all made for the next spring. But until then he would have to stick to his Government hunter position. Though



with the coming of cold weather the hunting would now be far harder than range riding, he did not propose to lose his hold on his claims. Mary proved no less determined. She refused the invitation of her friend for an all-winter visit.

On the last day of the visit Joe started out, rather heavy-hearted, to buy their supplies. As he neared the bank Kiowa came out, high-headed and tight-jawed with anger. Over the peak of her old hat Parlen smiled with smug satisfaction. His eyes shifted sideways to take in the approaching man. Their cool gaze rose from Joe's belt to his face, and suddenly fixed in a wide stare. The smile froze.

At the same moment Kiowa saw Joe. She turned her back on him and walked off towards the hotel, leaving Parlen entirely unsheltered. He started to shrink back into the bank. Joe, somber-eyed, crooked a finger at him.

"Wait a minute, you! This is luck! Easiest place I could find for you to pay what's owing to me."

"What's owing?" mumbled Parlen.

"Yes. Hold on. Don't go in till we reach an agreement. When you pass that door it'll be to draw me a check in payment for two hundred sheep, one collie, a cabin and furniture, one pistol, one rifle with silencer, horse corral, wagon, and three miles of fence wire."

"You're joking! I don't owe you anything. I'm not responsible. I can prove I was on my way to Denver."

“The Circle B did it — your men. No, stand still, if you know what’s good for you. Keep your hands in front.”

The reckless flash in Joe’s eyes checked his cousin’s attempt to signal with his hands behind his back. Joe went on somberly:

“I’m not after damages. Fair pay is all I want. Twenty-five hundred will let you down easy.”

“Twenty-five hundred!” The bare suggestion of such a loss nerved Parlen to renewed resistance. “You can’t prove I’m legally responsible. It will be a jury of cowmen, not sheep-herders!”

Joe’s look became still more hard and reckless.

“This case isn’t going to any jury. Shell out.”

Before the stare in those ruddy brown eyes, Parlen’s gaze wavered and sank. It saw the lean brown hand of his cousin go down and backwards.

“Don’t — don’t shoot, Joe. I’ll pay.”

“Thought so. Now we’ll go in, and you’ll take care to make no wrong moves. You and your men have got me used to the idea of nooses. Savvy?”

Parlen sidled into the bank, with Joe at his elbow. The two bank officials in sight and a lone customer looked surprised to see the cousins together. But neither Parlen nor Joe betrayed any excitement. They kept side by side, with almost affectionate closeness, at the customers’ writing shelf and across to the teller’s window.

The writing on the back of the check in Parlen’s hand won another glance of surprise and curiosity from the teller. It certified that the check was

a compromise payment for property of the payee destroyed by agents of the payor. Parlen had signed this statement above the endorsement of Joe.

Neither cousin said anything until the teller had handed out the two thousand five hundred dollars in fifties. Joe pocketed the bank notes, and flipped out the new automatic pistol that he had bought after the raid. Parlen shrank back. Joe gave him a derisive glance, and grinned in at the startled teller.

“’Sall right, mister man. Needn’t throw up. I don’t ever carry it loaded in town. Just wanted to show you the easy action.”

He shucked the cylinder and snapped the trigger half a dozen times in rapid succession. From Parlen’s throat came a choking sound that gargled and burst out in a snarling curse. He clutched the hilt of his own pistol. Joe kicked. The pistol went spinning across the floor of the bank. As Joe dodged his cousin’s rush, he thrust his empty automatic back into its holster.

Parlen whirled for another rush. Loss of the twenty-five hundred dollars had more than outraged his feelings. He had given up the money only through fear of instant death. But Joe had added insult to the injury. He had won on a mere bluff. There had been no need to pay. Realization of the fact goaded Parlen into a fury that burst all the restraints of his habitual prudence. He would first beat his cheater to a pulp, and then take back the money.

The second time Joe did not dodge. His mind



flamed with the fiery remembrance of Mary's burning home — of Mary struggling in the grasp of the Circle B ruffians while the leaders of the gang made ready to lynch him.

He reeled back before the shock of Parlen's taller, heavier body. Parlen lunged again to clutch him fast. But the disadvantage was only momentary. Joe's muscles were wiry as a gray wolf's and lithe as a wildcat's. He writhed out of Parlen's savage clinch and knocked him down with an upper-cut.

Three times the big owner of the Circle B scrambled to his feet and rushed. Each time Joe took all that his cousin had to offer, and smashed back with swift punches that sent him down again. After the fourth fall Parlen rolled over but did not attempt to get up.

"Come on, you quitter," taunted Joe. "I'm just getting warmed up."

A number of men were crowding in at the door of the bank. The desperate glance of Parlen's puffing eyes fixed upon these staring spectators. He spat out a tooth and opened his cut lips to cry murder. Joe beat him to it.

"Sall over, gentlemen. Just a private family settlement of scores. No shooting. We weren't even loaded. At least, I wasn't. Was I, Parl?"

With the question Joe's pistol flipped out and snapped with the shoving of a clip of cartridges into the magazine. A swift shuck of the cylinder popped the top cartridge into the barrel.

"That's all, gentlemen. Just a private squaring

of accounts. Wasn't it, Parl? We've evened up all around, and we're ready to call quits, aren't we? — Or do you first want me to tell all about it?"

To Parlen's dread of that wavering automatic was added the fear of ridicule. Joe had his witness to prove that the pistol had not been loaded. If the truth leaked out, the whole Yamparo country would laugh at the owner of the Circle B.

Parlen staggered to his feet and offered a seemingly cordial hand.

"You win, kid. I'm willing to call it quits, if you are. I can't blame my men for hazing your sheep outfit. They're cowboys. I was away and had nothing to do with it. But I want everybody to know that I have paid you in full for all the damages."

Joe neither smiled nor took the proffered hand.

"No," he replied. "I've compromised with you, and the account is settled. All the same, that does not mean you have paid in full. Your bill of sale for the whole Circle B wouldn't half pay for the way your coyotes hazed Mary."

"But, Joe, you've just said——"

"Yes, that's ended. We're starting a new deal. You thought you had run me off my land. Right here and now I'm giving you public notice that I haven't relinquished my claims. Have you anything to say?"

With one battered eye to the crowd, Parlen replied in a very mild tone:

"Nobody can deny the legal right of nesters to

straddle any water they find unappropriated. What riled my boys was your bringing sheep into cow country."

Fully half the crowd inside the door were cowmen or punchers. Joe saw their faces darken. He was not to be caught so easily.

"Who's been over-stocking the divide to crowd off the Seven Up?" he asked. "Who sneaked in and bought Aunt Ki's leased hay land?"

Parlen was little more popular in town than had been their uncle. Joe saw the faces of the onlookers unbend to mirth over his return jab. He took his opportunity to push out through the melting crowd.

With the twenty-five hundred dollars in his pocket, he hastened to tell Mary of a change in their plans. She was to accept the invitation of her friend and remain as a paying guest until spring.

Mary only smiled at him. He dwelt upon the privations and dangers of winter hunting in the hills. She put on her camp clothes.



## CHAPTER XXII

### BLIZZARD BLESSINGS

**D**URING their trip out both rode all the way. Joe had used what was left of his Government pay to buy a pack horse. All the bank notes of Parlen's twenty-five hundred dollars "settlement" nestled in Mary's pocket. She had agreed with Joe that if the money were put in a bank Parlen might tie it up with a lawsuit.

Out at their homestead they stuffed the notes into an empty baking-powder can. The can was cached a foot deep under the stone-and-adobe fireplace that Joe built in the corner of the little cabin.

This fireplace made their rude hut a home that would be cozy in the worst of winter blizzards. The floor was already covered with coyote and lion skins brought in during their first months of hunting. Enough were left over to make a thick mattress on the pole bunk.

Joe sought to persuade Mary to remain at the cabin, where she could be comfortable. He even ordered her to stay. She wept and clung to him and said she would die of loneliness if she could not keep with him. After that he could not refuse to take her. But he had his work to do. Provisioned for a month's stay, they struck back into the hills.

Within the first week they met with a spell of

cold fall rains that turned to sleet. Even slickers and chaps failed to keep out the damp chill. Still Mary did not complain. The wet cold was made endurable by the small tarpaulin tent that Joe had bought for winter camping. All that she asked was to be permitted to remain with him.

After Squaw Winter came Indian Summer, delightful even in the midst of the ragged craggy badlands of the Yamparos. Clouds rolled on the snow peaks of the sierra. But every day the sun poured down balmy warmth upon the golden aspens of the hill cañons and the riot of scarlet and crimson foliage along the scraggy slopes. The nights were only pleasantly crisp.

When the time came to return to the cabin for more food, Mary refused to stay. Yet before they could set out on their second trip, a snow storm struck down from the mountains across the Yamparos. By the time the flakes ceased falling, Mary had made herself a hooded skin shirt not unlike an Esquimo parka.

The snow gave Joe his first perfect tracking weather. This time he worked slowly westward, picking a way along the ridges to avoid the deep drifts in the ravines and cañons.

Far over near the high mountains he found what he was looking for—a set of huge wolf footprints that showed a splayed forepaw. Another set, almost as large, told that Splay Foot's latest mate had escaped the rifles of the Circle B riders.

At last Joe was on the trail of the quarry that

had won him his position as Government hunter. His work now was to justify his selection for the task of running down the craftiest and most murderous of lobo stock-killers ever known in the Yamparo country.

With Mary along, the task was doubly hard. During the warm months she had been of great help in his hunting. Now she proved a great hindrance. He could not take any chances of her horse slipping on icy slopes or snow-hidden rocks. The way had to be picked with utmost care. Often a long circuit was necessary around crags and ravines among which Splay Foot and her mate had bounded with ease.

Another snowstorm blotted out the trail. As soon as travel became possible, they struck camp and started southeast. The going was slower and harder than even the worst that had come before. They spent a bitter cold Thanksgiving night in Gotch Ear's old cave. From there they worked around the cañons and crags to the runway ridge where Joe had trapped and out-fought the older she-wolf's still more murderous daughter. But Splay Foot had not returned to her run.

The long, twisting circuit back through the hills, west and north, and out to the cave and runway, had taken weeks of heart-breaking exertion and hardship. Mary's face was thin and drawn. Under her sunken blue eyes were black circles. Only a little deer meat was left in the pack sacks.

Even Joe's stubborn determination had reached



the breaking point. He gave up the search for Splay Foot and headed for the cabin. They came down the divide on the afternoon of a bleak, gusty day. Storm clouds swirled low on the mountains.

Mary was in urgent need of shelter. Joe hurriedly led the way to the crest of the last ridge that shut them off from their home creek. They looked down into the little valley. From amidst the spruces that hid their hut-cabin dense smoke was rolling low over the evergreen spires.

Two men rode out of the spruce thicket and started to cross the creek. Joe's eyes, trained to distant vision, recognized Hooch Huggins and Mex Chavez. He jerked his rifle out of its boot and opened fire. At his second shot, Hooch swayed so violently that he almost pitched over his horse's head. He clutched his saddlehorn and spurred the broncho into a dead run.

Another shot knocked the Mexican's big sombrero from his black head. He raced away even more wildly than his mate. A dry click followed the next jerk of Joe's trigger. His rifle was empty. Before he could reload, the raiders had made off behind the cover of the rock comb where Parl had once sought shelter.

A pitiful cry forced Joe's attention back to Mary. He got the horses down the ridge side as fast as safety permitted. The first blasts of the coming blizzard swirled down the valley.

Close to the burning hut Joe slashed the pack rope and pitched the tent. He sprinted his mare up

along the creek bank and climbed to the hole in the lookout crag. Every bit of food that they had left in the cache was gone. He raced back to build a pole fire in front of the tent and kill the pack horse. Without food Mary would die.

The blizzard struck—an Arctic gale of driven snow that stung like crackled glass. The bitter cold pierced even through Joe's winter coat. But he labored on in the furious white swirl, hauling more rails for the fire, cutting young trees to thicken the natural windbreak of the spruces around the tent, lopping aspen boughs for horse feed.

For two nights and a day the blizzard raged—and for two nights and a day Joe fought to save the lives that were to him far more precious than his own.

On the morning of the second day the wind lulled, but the snow continued to fall. It was already deep for riding. All through the storm Joe had kept Mary's pony and his mare tied near the fire. They had fed well on the twigs and bark of the aspen boughs.

Though Mary was far too weak to ride, Joe now saddled both animals. In order to mount with Mary in his arms, he built a pile of poles. Any unwrapping of the blankets from about his precious burden would have meant one if not two deaths.

The going proved even harder than he had expected. The horses bucked the snow drifts for hours before they at last managed to get down off the divide onto the more level ground of the lower range.

After that Joe was able to work them around the larger drifts. But the snow continued to fall heavily. The pace of the tired animals became still slower.

By mid-afternoon Joe had twice shifted to the pony and back upon the mare. After the third shift the almost exhausted pony lagged behind. Dusk found the mare staggering along the drift-covered round-up road, around the bend of the hill from which Joe had seen Parlen go to torment the captive she-wolf. The snow was falling too fast for him to see even as far as the feed sheds. But he knew the hill, and called encouragingly to the mare.

From back around the hill, as if in devilish mockery of his reviving hope, came the frightful yells of gray wolves closing upon their quarry. He dug his spurs into the heaving flanks of the mare and freed his gun hand from its mitten. But then, rising above the clamor of the wolves, he heard the death-scream of the pony. He eased down the wild plunges of the mare to a steady floundering.

The drifts of the last mile came near to seeing an end alike to horse and riders. The mare was ready to drop when, at the corner of the feed sheds, a final desperate plunge broke through a high drift into a beaten path. Down the open way she tottered, through the gray dimness of the falling snow.

Suddenly, close before him, Joe saw the faint gleam of a window. He swung off, groped his way to the door, and burst into the kitchen.

Kiowa was at the table, dishing up supper to



Limpy and Swede and Rocker. At the crash of the in-flung door, all turned to stare at the shapeless snow-covered figure that staggered in out of the storm. Joe stood swaying, too utterly outspent to speak.

At a tart command from Kiowa, Swede lurched up to shut the door. As he passed he peered under Joe's down-drooped hat brim.

"Huh!" he grunted. "You—kid! Miss Mary—she ain't——"

The door slammed shut with the kick of his big boot. His powerful arms supported Joe and his burden to the bench.

"Hold on," cried Kiowa. "I don't run a hostelry for sheep-herders. Even a cow shed's too good for——"

Joe had flung the upper wrapping from about Mary's golden head. Her face was deathly white. Kiowa gasped and qualified:

"A woman's a woman—even if she's been a miserable disobedient ingrate. She can stay—but only if she sends you packing. I'll take her in on that one condition. She's to come back to me for good, and have no more truck with you, you ornery sheep-herder!"

Mary's sunken eyelids fluttered and opened. Her blue eyes murmured a despairing appeal:

"No, Gran'ma! No, no! If he goes, we must go, too—we must!"

"We?" scoffed the old woman.

"Yes—I and——"

Feebly Mary sought to lift up above the edge of the blankets that which lay on her bosom. From the midst of the close bundle came a tiny muffled wail. Kiowa turned as if lashed across the face the way she had lashed Mary.

An instant later she flung herself at the unbidden guests. She plucked the fur-swathed baby out of its mother's arms.

"You lazy gawks!" she shrilled at her men. "Hop to it, Swede!—yank in her bed. Cram the firebox, Rocker. You, Limpy, slam that fresh milk on the stove!"

As the men jumped to obey, the baby squirmed in its great-grandmother's close grasp. A tiny fist thrust out and clutched fast hold of her skinny finger. No question but that the child was very much alive. The great-grandmother snuggled it tenderly to her withered breast, and whirled to jerk her rocker around beside Joe. He eased Mary down into the chair, and pitched over on the floor.

Kiowa had grasped a cup of coffee. She held it to Mary's lips. Mary turned her head to look down at Joe.

"Him—first," she whispered. "If you'll not, I don't want to—to live."

Joe managed to pull himself up on his elbow.

"No, Mary," he urged. "Think of the baby. You must stay and care for him and——"

"Him!" broke in Kiowa. "It's a boy, is it?"

"Yes— If only you'll care for him and Mary, Aunt Ki! I'll leave—just as soon as I can get up.

Only, I can't go far tonight. My mare's all in."

The old woman doubled over to thrust the coffee cup under his nose.

"Choke your fool gab with that! Never did think you had a lick of sense. You ain't even got the savvy to know my great-grandson's pa belongs to the Seven Up.— Hey, you, Rocker, chase out and hustle Joe's mare to the barn. All the oats she'll eat, and rub her down till your arm falls off. She's brought home my children."

Mary smiled and went off into a faint.

In past the door opened by Rocker came the desolate howl of a wolf. Limpy grabbed Kiowa's old shotgun off the antlers and hopped out after the half-wit wrangler to the shivering, exhausted mare. Strengthened by the hot coffee, Joe tottered to his feet.

"Wake up, Mary," he called. "Your pet is serenading you."

Mary's eyelids did not open. But her lips quivered with a hysterical whisper:

"Good luck! good luck! She's brought us good luck—she's brought us home!"



## CHAPTER XXIII

### THE FAWNING WOLF

**F**OOD and a day's rest brought back all Joe's strength. A week of loving care put Mary well along on the road to recovery. Born and bred in the open, she possessed perfect health, and her power of endurance had been doubled by the months of rough camping and hard riding among the Yamparos. What she had gone through during the blizzard would have killed any city girl. But her vitality was so great that she fairly rebounded from the black depths of the Valley of the Shadow.

Never in all her life had she been so happy. The baby shared her vitality. Despite his harsh reception into the world, he throve like a Hereford calf. Old Kiowa hovered over him as if she were a mother hen with one chick. This did not surprise Mary. Like any normal mother, she believed that her baby was the most wonderful child in all the world.

Nor was she much surprised over her grandmother's tender bullying of herself. It was only a revival of their relations during her childhood. But the old cow-woman's manner towards Joe marked a vast change. The hated intruder and sheep-herder had suddenly become the man of the Seven Up.

Half measures were not in Kiowa's nature. She did not stop at mere toleration of Joe as one of the

hands. She accepted him as Mary's husband. He therefore was her grandson—a member of the family in full fellowship.

What counted even more with Mary, her grandmother at once started in to wrangle with Joe over the management of the Seven Up as if he were an equal partner. Though the old Tartar scoffed at his advice and opinions, she kept asking for them. She demanded that he offer plans to put the Seven Up back on its feet.

Bit by bit she let out how she had dickered with Parlen. She even told of her last agreement to help him win Mary, in return for a long lease on the hay land. His eagerness had been so great that he had taken her note in payment of the right to cut the last crop of hay. But he had cannily refused to sign any lease until sure of Mary.

That deal was now, of course, all off. What few beef steers she had to sell had brought in only enough to pay running expenses. The note to Parlen would fall due the first of the year. What was to be done about it?

Joe told of the money that he and Mary had cached in the baking-powder can, under the fireplace of their little cabin. During the blizzard he had been far too intent upon saving Mary and the baby to think of digging up the can. The twenty-five hundred dollars would more than pay off the note to Parlen.

A heavy thaw, followed by a dry cold-snap, made a horseback trip to the divide fairly easy. Joe and

Limpy went to fetch the cached money. They found the tarpaulin tent crushed down by the snow, but otherwise as Joe and Mary had left it.

While Limpy packed the camp outfit, Joe dug the snow away from the base of the broken chimney. In the fireplace he came upon a coverless baking-powder can. It was crushed and fire-rusted and empty. Joe started to chop the frozen ground. His belt ax plunged down into a hole full of wood ashes. Before burning the little cabin, Huggins and Chavez had found and robbed the cache.

Limpy said nothing against Joe's announcement of his next move. All he did was to put the sixth cartridge into his old "smoke wagon."

They made the Circle B ranch mid-morning of the next day. All the men not out on the range were working down at the corrals. Joe and Limpy circled to the trees from which the assassin had shot Taylor Brent. From the trees they crossed to the house and walked in without warning.

Parlen sat at a home-made desk in the kitchen, balancing his account books for the year. When he looked up and saw his visitors, his face went white and his head scrouged between his shoulders.

"What d'you want?" he demanded. "What you doing here?"

Joe drove straight at the point:

"Came to collect again that twenty-five hundred you paid me in town. Shell out. I know you have it—all except the split you gave Hooch and Mex for stealing it when they burnt my second cabin."



Parlen shoved his open bank books along the desk top.

"You're on the wrong trail. Look at my bank account. Search me—and the house. I didn't even know you had been burned out again. My orders to all my men were to shy clear of the divide until the spring round-up."

"So you say."

"It's the honest truth, Joe. We called it quits and accounts squared, there in town. I've been living up to my side of the agreement. Look for yourself. You'll find I haven't had anything to do with the steal. Ask my men. I fired Huggins and Chavez just before the big blizzard. They headed south. That's all I know about it."

Joe showed his faith in his cousin's word by frisking him, examining the bank books, and searching the house. Their uncle's room had been closed up ever since the murder. When Parlen unlocked the door, Joe saw that the desk and chair were gone. Boards covered the lower part of the window from which had been taken the sash with the bullet-drilled pane of glass. A thick layer of dust covered the bed and the dark stains that Limpy knew were on the floor.

Brent's strong-box had been shifted from its hiding place to a still more secret hole in Parlen's room. At Joe's quiet order, Parlen opened the hole and unlocked the box. In it were only a few small bank notes. Joe thrust them back into their tray.

"Guess you're one too many for me—this time."

"I gave it to you straight, Joe. You know it now," replied Parlen. He smiled and offered his hand. "You'll stop over-night. Your old cot was so rickety that I threw it out. No need, though, for you to go to the bunk-house. You can have Uncle Lor's room."

"Lord A'mighty, no!—not for him!" shrilled Limpy. "S'pose you give the kid your cot, and go in there your ownself."

Parlen's smile tightened. He closed and locked the door of the death room.

"I'll call in Curley and have him lay out what cold chuck he has on hand—if you don't wish to stay for supper."

"We can make the back trail without any of your chuck," replied Joe. "Come on, Limpy."

The Circle B men saw as little of the visitors going as of their coming, and Parlen evidently thought best to take no action. Nobody trailed after the Seven Up riders.

The saddlebags of the visitors were empty, but Joe did not care. He had no hankering for the flesh-pots of the Circle B. That night he and Limpy turned in supperless.

At dawn, as Limpy was saddling up, Joe shot a snowshoe rabbit. It fell on a snow drift. When Joe went to pick it up, he saw a shoulder sticking out of the snow.

The dead man was Hooch Huggins. One of his pockets had been turned inside out. The others, like the unbuckled money-belt, were empty.

There was no trace of his horse, nor of Mex Chavez.

Until now the drift piled up by the blizzard had protected the body. While Joe and Limpy built a cairn of stones to keep off the coyotes, the old man grumbled an admission.

"I got to own up Parl wasn't lying—leastways not altogether. Like's not he sent 'em to get your wad. But I figger, when Hooch cashed in, that there greaser side-kick of hisn frisked him and skipped the country."

"It's all the same to us," said Joe. "The money's gone, and we can't put it on Parl, even if Mex turned it in."

The snowshoe rabbit proved to be both thin and tough, and it was their last food during all the long ride over the back trail. But they were inured to privation. Whenever the pangs of hunger became too troublesome, they drew in their belts another hole.

When at last they reached the Seven Up Joe still felt far too great concern over the loss of the money to think much of his hunger. The bad news started Mary to crying. But at sight of Joe's face she dashed away her tears and began to predict that everything would come out all right. Kiowa grimly agreed.

"She's right, son. It sure will. I stood up to Lor Brent all by my lonesome, and I've stood up to Parl. Never knuckled down to neither of 'em. Now I've got you for a side-kick. Don't you fret, boy.



We'll buck through in spite of him. Just you set your *cabeza* to scheming out how we're going to turn the trick."

Enheartened by the trust of his "womenfolks," Joe started to think out possible plans. He first suggested that money could be saved by laying off Swede and Limpy. Much as he disliked to part with his friends, he knew that they could soon get on with some other outfit. The half-witted Rocker worked for his keep. Money meant nothing to him, and off the Seven Up he would have been lost.

The two punchers, however, refused to be let out.

"Forget it, kid," said Limpy. "Me and Swede are done set on making up for the years we had to feed at your uncle's hog trough. Miss Mary's cooking is doughnuts to dollars—and me and Swede chooses the doughnuts. Savvy?"

"You're white," said Kiowa. "Tell you what, Joe. We'll figger 'em a stake in the next beef sale."

Joe promptly calculated a percentage that Kiowa agreed would give all a fair gamble. This, in effect, made Limpy and Swede partners in the Seven Up for the coming year. They were top-riders. Neither had ever slacked in his work. But now they went at it with the keen interest of owners.

Thanks to their zeal, Joe was able to go on earning his salary as a Government hunter. Owing to the return of Splay Foot to the Seven Up range, he could honestly use the home ranch as the base camp for his hunting.

Unhampered by Mary, he started in again on his

efforts to destroy the butchering she-wolf and her mate. There may have been a lack of game back in the hills. But whether or not this was the cause, the splay-footed cattle-killer continued to hang around the ranch. After every snow Joe cut the fresh trails of the gray she-devil and her mate—and their every visit meant a slaughtered cow or calf. He set traps with utmost care and skill; he laid out in darkness and storm, hopeful of a shot.

But the once-trapped she-wolf proved still more crafty and wary than before her capture. Time and again, she saved both herself and her mate from the traps; and their visits were made only on moonless nights. Joe was given no chance for a shot.

Most exasperating of all, after each kill Splay Foot serenaded the ranch with her dismal howling. At first Joe took this for derision of his futile efforts. But when he found the splay-foot tracks on Mary's trail to and from the barn, he could not overcome the fancy that the ferocious beast still remembered and craved the scent of the human who had saved her from suffering and death.

Yet whatever possibility of truth there might have been in this odd notion, Joe became all the more determined to destroy the murderous gray pest and her mate. He at last decided to hire a pack of dogs.

By this time Kiowa had agreed to certain changes that he had suggested in the methods of the Seven Up. A favorable spell of weather made probable a visit from Parlen to collect his over-due note. Kiowa rode to town with Joe.

While waiting for the owner of the hunting pack to bring his dogs from the adjoining county, Joe and Kiowa had a brisk set-to with Mackay. Parlen had embittered the banker against himself by investing the bulk of his funds in a rival bank. But it was Joe's clear-handed plans for the future of the Seven Up that won for him and Kiowa the loan they were after.

Upon their return home with the pack owner and his dogs, they found Parlen waiting. He had reached the ranch on the day they had left, and had settled down to make himself agreeable. He had praised the baby and in every way conducted himself in such a respectful and friendly manner that Mary had quite melted from her reserve. Even old Limpy was beginning to admit that Parl might possibly be a trifle less mean than had been his uncle.

The visitor greeted Joe and Kiowa with a smile, and insisted upon vigorous handshakes.

"Glad to see you, Aunt Ki! Same to you, Joe! Mighty clever getting the dogs. Remember that time you and I and Mary got the pups of Gotch Ear, and just missed nailing the old she-devil herself? You'll get Mary's pup now for keeps. Ought to have heard her howl last night. She must have been right under Mary's window."

"She was, was she?" grunted Kiowa. "Why'd you pass up your chance, Mary, to slam a couple loads of buckshot out through the window?"

"Why—I—Baby was asleep, Gran'ma."

The laugh over this "mother's reason" eased off



the chilliness with which both Joe and Kiowa had met the visitor. The talk centered upon pack hunting until, after supper, the pack owner went to the bunk-house with the three hands.

Kiowa promptly turned upon Parlen.

"Come to collect, have you? All right. Let's see my note."

"No, not to collect, Aunt Ki," said Parlen. "Joe told me how that pair of badmen stole his and Mary's money—and I've been talking with Mary. I'll be glad to renew the note, to run until a month after beef round-up. Rather, we'll draw a new one, to cover the principal and interest to date, along with an accommodation charge of, say, a hundred dollars. The interest is to be fourteen, instead of twelve per cent."

Kiowa puckered her lips.

"That's sure mighty accommodating of you, Parl—mighty! Happens, though, Mackay let me have double the amount, at eight."

"Mackay—he—" Parlen's face darkened. His eyes narrowed to pin-points.

"Why not? Y'see, I've got a side-kick now, and he's got something more'n hair under his hat."

"Sheep wool!" snarled Parlen.

The old woman's face wrinkled mockingly.

"Mebbeso, mebbe no. A bunch of woolies would get me my share of the divide grass you've hogged with your over-stocking. 'Tany rate, you can take the hay land you hornswoggled me out of, and go clean plumb to t'other place!"

"If I do, the Seven Up will follow suit. You've got to have winter feed."

"Don't worry," put in Joe. "Mackay thinks well enough of our plans to back us. We're going to put in alfalfa, cut down our range stock, and buy a bunch of Shorthorn milkers. That will mean both beef and butterfat. A light truck will run our cream to the railroad every week."

"That'll leave plenty of range down at the divide to summer-graze sheep—if it suits our notion," added Kiowa. "Come on now—trot out that note. Here's your cash."

Parlen counted the bank notes with reluctant slowness, and still more reluctantly cancelled the note. But the proceeding gave him time to get a fresh grip on himself. He smiled as he handed the note to Joe.

"That puts us square again—all square. As for your plans, I feel sure that both you and Aunt Ki are too much cowmen right to bring in sheep. And you don't need to put in alfalfa. I offered to lease the hay land to Aunt Ki. The offer still stands."

"But it don't ride," jeered Kiowa. "Alfalfa'll give us cheaper food, time we're ready for it. What's more, my fences come off your hay land. We'll graze it till you put up your own posts and wire."

The bargainer looked at Mary and forced another smile.

"At least you'll admit I've shown I want to get back on our old friendly terms. I own up I have made some mistakes. But, Aunt Ki, you at least oughtn't to blame me. It was your backing that

got me in bad with Joe and Mary.”

“Shucks!” muttered the old woman. “Why drag in a dead hoss? Le’s chuck all that over our shoulders. Only you’ll find that sheep proposition ain’t any joke ’fyou don’t quit over-stocking the divide.”

A politely masked yawn from Joe brought the visitor to his feet. He shook hands all around and went to look at the baby before going to the bunk-house. Kiowa slammed the door and slid the thick wooden bar into its socket.

Alone with Joe in their room, Mary snuggled the baby tight in her arms and drew the blanket curtain close over the little window. Joe noticed the old shotgun lying across the bed. As he moved it to the corner, Mary explained in a hushed murmur:

“I didn’t shoot, because—because it was like having a watch dog. I felt—safer.”

“You mean that he——”

“No, oh, no, Joe! He didn’t do a thing. Besides, he showed himself so friendly tonight and willing to make up. It was only my fancy. But just the same, it was a comfort having her out there.”



## CHAPTER XXIV

### LIERS-IN-WAIT

**J**OE awoke with an odd feeling of gratefulness towards Splay Foot for having given Mary that assurance of safety. But this in no degree lessened his determination to destroy the she-wolf and her mate.

At dawn he avoided a parting handshake from Parlen by setting off with Limpy and Swede and the pack owner. The pack was made up of seven Airedales for tracking and a pair of Russian wolfhounds for view running.

By sunrise the dogs were on the most recent trail of Splay Foot and her mate. It wound around through the lower hills to where the gray killers had pulled down a young buck. From there they had circled out upon the lower range, hopeful, no doubt, that clouds would darken the quarter moon and so enable them to come in to the ranch for calf meat, without danger of being shot.

This out-running trail gave promise of good luck to the hunters. Though the behavior of the dogs showed that it was several hours old, Joe felt sure the lobo mates were still down away from the hills. He and Swede and Limpy at once lined far out on each side of the trail, leaving the pack owner to ride with his dogs. The line was wide enough to

net the gray mates if they should attempt any sudden doubling back.

An hour's steady loping brought the hunters around a wide sweep south and east and then north-west to the coulee, less than half a mile north of the ranch-house. Among the thickets in the wide bed of the coulee the Airedales burst into a yelping racket that told they had struck fresh trail.

Joe sprinted his mare across the coulee and up over the ridge on the north side. Nearly half a mile away he saw two gray forms streaking towards the hills. They were so close to cover that he barely had time to take a flying dismount and fire one shot. The rear wolf whirled over, but instantly bounded up and leaped from sight after its mate.

The dogs, however, had reached the ridge top as soon as Joe. As he hop-mounted and dug his spurs into the mare's flanks he saw the yelling pack dash down the ridge slope. The wolfhounds were already many lengths in the lead. Unable to follow a trail by scent, they had been compelled to tail behind the Airedales. But one glimpse of the quarry had now sent them racing ahead. They dropped the other dogs to the rear as a thoroughbred running horse would outdistance a cart nag.

The speed of the big, slim, shaggy hounds was tremendous—equal almost to the panic flight of a pronghorn antelope. Yet Joe did not count very surely upon their success. The nearest spurs of the hills were less than three miles away, and the wolves might be able to run under cover. The hounds would

then have to wait for the Airedales to lead along the trail.

The best chance was that the wolves might swing off sideways or double back. Joe raced the mare at top speed, keeping well out on his side of the trail. He soon came opposite the spot where his bullet had bowled over the rearmost wolf. But a stiff rise beyond compelled him to ease down the rush of the mare. To have blown her would have been senseless folly.

They labored up over the round of the ridge. There were the wolfhounds, as far ahead as had been the wolves when first sighted—and there, only a hundred feet or so in the lead of the hounds, were two gray forms bounding into a patch of chaparral. The glimpse of them was too fleeting for even a shot from the saddle. Joe smiled as he again put the mare into a dead run.

“Brought to bay!” he shouted.

He had recalled the pack owner’s explanation of how, with gray wolves, the purpose of the hounds was to overtake and delay the quarry until the Airedales could come up. No hound could outfight even a yearling lobo, but now and then one might manage to leap across and cripple the quarry with a snap bite above the loins.

Joe’s hopes soared. Beyond doubt his shot had slackened the speed of one of the gray mates. The other had lagged to keep in company. If only the hounds would circle the patch of chaparral and so head off the skulkers on the other side. No, the



fool gangle-legs were jackrabbiting straight into the scrub!

He veered towards the north side of the thicket. Over his left shoulder he saw Limpy and Swede, the pack owner, and the Airedales, all likewise racing for the chaparral.

A few moments of hopeful sprinting, then back out of the scrub doubled one of the hounds. He came fleeing on three legs. Still clinging to hope, Joe raced on. He neared the chaparral. He sprinted around its right-hand edge.

The next cover was only a short distance away. He did not again glimpse the gray killers bounding from sight. The possibility that they were still at bay brought him on around the far side of the thicket. There, just beyond an out-lying clump, lay the body of the other hound.

Joe leaped off to examine the signs. The prints of a big outspread left forepaw in the damp sand told the tale. While her wounded mate bolted from the thicket and ran straight on to the next cover, Splay Foot had side-leaped and hidden behind the outer clump of scrub. As the leading hound broke cover to dash after her mate, the she-wolf had flashed out and slashed his throat. She had caught the other hound in the midst of the thick-set scrub, where he could not leap clear of her rush. The wonder was that he had escaped at all.

When the pack owner rode up, he cursed at sight of the dead hound, and whooped the Airedales on along the trail of the killers. They needed no urg-

ing. It was a blood trail. After rather more than an hour of hard running up into the hills, they overtook the wounded he-wolf.

This time Splay Foot made off and left her mate to his fate. Weakened though he was by the bullet wound, the gray devil killed two of the Airedales before the others managed to tear the life out of him.

Yelping with triumph, the slashed survivors of the fight dashed off again on the trail of Splay Foot. She had headed into the worst of the broken badlands. The riders could not follow the pack. They spread far apart and picked whatever routes their horses could scramble through or over. It recalled to Joe that day of his hot-headed boyhood when he and Parlen and Mary had tracked old Gotch Ear through this same rough part of the hills.

Now, however, there seemed to be a possibility of success. The yelping of the dogs carried far across the crags and cañons, and there was a chance that Splay Foot might double back within rifle range of one of the advancing hunters. Yet hour after hour passed without sight or sound of the crafty she-wolf. The riders even lost all sound and trace of the dogs. At sunset a prearranged smoke signal brought them together for the night's camp.

Dawn found them once more in the saddle. Joe led the party towards the old lair of Gotch Ear. Midway they came across the pack leader crawling along Splay Foot's trail. The dog was so outrun that he hardly could stand. His paws were worn raw. The cunning she-wolf had led the pack over

the rough rocks of ridge combs, down slides of sharp-edged stones, through stubby scrub, and along the gravel and hardpan of cañon beds.

Fed, his feet bandaged, and his wounds sterilized, the pack leader was able to take the back trail. Swede remained to help the owner gather in the other dogs. Joe and Limpy went on to Gotch Ear's lair. Limpy circled and came up the cañon. Joe crept along the ridge crags to the "back door." They bagged nothing. The cave was empty. Its lack of strong odor told that it had not been used for a long time.

So ended the dog chase. The pack owner had been given his fill of Splay Foot. Back at the ranch he announced his intention of leaving for home as soon as he could boot the paws of the Airedales.

Though the foreleg of the crippled wolfhound had been mangled beyond mending, Mary at once dressed the wound with carbolic salve and started to put the shattered bone in splints.

"No use you fussing, ma'am," said the owner. "He's done for. Couldn't even catch a coyote now—and if he did, he'd run from him. That hell-wolf plumb busted his spirit. I'll just lead him off a ways on the road and put the poor cuss out of his mis'ry."

"Oh, no," pleaded Mary. "Give him to me. I'll take care of him."

"'Nother mouth to feed," objected Kiowa.

Mary smiled and went on with her surgery. She had a new pet and the dog kennel a new tenant. There was nothing more to be said. Joe had no



objections. The hound had shared in the hunt that had given him that shot at Splay Foot's mate. The he-wolf's scalp was better than nothing. Joe sent it to town by the pack owner for mailing, and went back to his lone hunt for the wily Splay Foot.

Three times after snow storms he worked around a wide circuit through the Yamparos, seeking to cut the she-wolf's trail. But she seemed to have vanished. On his third hunt, the last week in March, he again visited the old lair. Splay Foot had not been near it. He decided that she had once more decamped from the Seven Up range, either back into the high mountains, or south to her old run on the Circle B.

Soon after this last hunt a tinge of green began to show on the lower range. Joe turned his attention to the trapping and poisoning of coyotes, until the spring round-up called for his aid.

When the Seven Up worked south to the divide, they found the Circle B outfit already on hand. But now not only Huggins and Chavez were gone, but also Bill and three others who had taken part in the first raid on Joe's homestead. The new men were friendly-spoken to the prospective owner of the Seven Up, and they endured Kiowa's tart gibes with good-natured tolerance.

For once the old cow-woman found little cause for complaint. Parlen had cleared almost all his stock off the divide. His camp had been pitched entirely away from the claims filed upon by Joe.

The Seven Up spent their first day throwing together a rough lean-to hut alongside the ashes of the

original cabin. At evening Parlen "dropped in" for a camp-fire call. Joe showed him the evergreen bunk and Mary's orderly arranged outfit inside the unfinished hut. Beside the bunk was the baby in the old home-made cradle that had rocked Mary's father.

"You see we're not camping," Joe explained. "We're living at home, on our claim. The rest are visiting us during the round-up."

Parlen smiled at Mary and chucked the baby under his dimpled chin.

"No need to tell me that, Joe. There's room for all of us on this range. You needn't lose any sleep over my contesting your claims. As for any more raids, you'll notice I've rid myself of all that bunch of trouble hunters."

"Pity you didn't fire 'em 'fore they fired Joe's home," rasped Kiowa.

"I did kick out Hooch and Mex, Aunt Ki, before they made their second raid. With regard to that, I understand that Joe gathered in at least a fifty-per-cent collection. Limpy tells me they found and buried Hooch on their last trip to the Circle B. Nobody mentioned it when I came to see you at the Seven Up."

"What if they did find him?" snapped Kiowa. "You've no call to put the killing on Joe. Like 's not he only winged him, and Chavez saw his chance to get away with Huggins share in the jackpot. Did he put the shooting on Joe when he turned in to you the big end of the haul?"

Parlen was too wary to be caught by even so

adroit a query. He gravely shook his head.

"I of course did not know they had gone for the money, Aunt Ki, and Mex took care to come nowhere near me. Joe found out for himself that I received no part of that despicable stealing. Didn't you, Joe? I'm very glad to think it was Mex, and not Joe, who gave Hooch what was coming to him."

Joe's generosity could no longer resist his cousin's insistent friendliness. His nature was not one to cherish past wrongs. He gripped Parlen's cool hand.

After this the round-up became almost a family affair, instead of a contest of rival outfits. Though few mavericks were brought in, Parlen insisted that half should go to the Seven Up. The final combing of the divide proved that he had kept his promise with regard to the over-stocking of the joint range. His little herd on the bunching-ground tallied only a few head more than Kiowa's.

When he broke camp he came for a last handgrip with Joe and a final chuck under the chin of the gurgling, cooing five-months-old baby. He even petted Mary's surly three-legged wolfhound. Mary joined in Joe's hearty invitation for his cousin to come around by way of the Seven Up whenever he went to town. His continued respectfulness towards her and his playing with the baby had at last overcome her lingering fear of him.



## CHAPTER XXV

### NIGHT PROWLERS

**I**F HISTORY repeats itself, so also, sometimes, do the freaks of the seasons.

Up in the old lair of Gotch Ear, her still more murderous daughter suckled a fatherless litter of young cubs. Their many little mouths were ever whining for more food. Never had Splay Foot been more ravenous.

Since her return to the old home, May had thrown over the broken Yamparos a mantle of emerald-green velvet, studded with flower jewels. Few deer remained among the lower hills. They were drifting back to the high mountains. Small chance of venison even for the tireless and super-crafty Splay Foot.

Down on the lower range the Seven Up riders constantly kept heading back from the hills the diminished herd of Herefords. Kiowa and Joe were carrying out their plans. Nearly half the white-faces had been sold. Only cows with calves were left. They were being herded close in during the day, and penned up in the big feed corral every night.

Had it not been for her cubs, Splay Foot would have come down upon the ranch every dark night. She knew that her stealth and cunning would save her from any trap or gun. Nor had she any fear of dogs, so far as her own safety was concerned. She

had proved that she could out-fight those strange long-legged runners, and then run the trackers to a stand.

But the pack had trailed her even as she trailed deer and elk. If she should venture to go for a calf, she might be trailed home to her lair. The cubs were still too young to leave the cave. Had there been only one, she could have carried it with her in flight. As it was, pursuit by trailing dogs would mean death to eight of her nine grunting, squirming, fuzzy offspring.

Yet day after day her need of meat became the more desperate. To feed those many little mouths she herself must eat. Came a time when for a full night and a day she vainly scoured the ravines and ridges for game. She failed to jump so much as a cottontail or a sage hen.

In the twilight she skulked back to the lair, tired and morose. She lay panting, tormented by the whining complaints of her hungry cubs. But some time after nightfall her acute senses became vaguely aware of an impending change.

She shook off the vainly suckling cubs and stalked to the upper entrance of the cave. The night was moonless, the air still and warm—a perfect spring night, with no chill to check the growth of the tender new grass and the unfolding of flower buds.

Splay Foot's greenish-yellow eyes peered up at the starlit sky above the distant black mass of the high mountains. No sign there of cloud. Yet a sense or intuition more subtle than any known to man con-

firmed her first vague feeling.

Full strength came back into her wire-drawn legs. She started off among the crags, directly away from the Seven Up ranch. As well to loaf around a wide circuit until absolutely certain that her trail would be covered.

Down along the foot of the Yamparos, to the southeast of the wolf lair, another night prowler was skulking towards the Seven Up ranch. The hoofs of his big thoroughbred horse were wrapped in gunnysacking and rawhide. This muffled their thud and left no prints on the old round-up road, or, at most, only meaningless blurs.

As the horse rounded the hill from which in daytime the buildings of the Seven Up could be seen, Parlen drew rein to peer ahead. No lights glimmered from the small slide windows of the ranch-houses.

Behind the hill he had looked at the old rolled-gold watch that had come to him from his uncle. Ten o'clock had passed. The dark windows confirmed his belief that everyone at the ranch was abed and asleep. If so, his one danger would be the crippled wolfhound. But the beast had very little power of scent, and he was kept at the old kennel. Of that Parlen had made sure during the round-up. With the hoof-muffles on his horse, and the night so dark, the hound would neither see nor hear him.

He went on a short distance and stopped where the road ran over bare ledges. The rock would show no trace of boot prints. He slipped out of his



saddle and felt the thoroughbred's feet to make sure the hoof-pads were all secure. He then loosened his pistol in its holster, transferred several matches from their waterproof safe to the right hand pocket of his shirt, and took a bundle of gunnysacking strips from the near saddlebag to wrap about his boots.

The pine tops on the crest of the hill sent out a sudden loud souging. Around the slope swept a blast of cold wind. Parlen shivered and straightened up to stare at the westward sky. All stars above the high mountains had been blotted out. Another gust, still more icy than the first, chilled his coatless body. With it came stinging pellets of hard, fine snow.

He thrust the burlap strips back into the saddlebag and hastened to untie the thongs with which his slicker was lashed atop his bed-roll behind the cantle of the saddle. Before he had his arms in the sleeves of the flopping waterproof the freak blizzard was howling through the pine boughs. A swirl of swift-driven bitter-cold snow swept down upon the thoroughbred and his rider.

Parlen hurriedly led his horse around under the lee of the hill. The storm simplified his scheme—made it almost absolutely safe. No need now for foot-muffles. Without them the thoroughbred could run much faster. He could now feel certain of a safe getaway. The blizzard would cover all tracks even from the nose of a bloodhound.

One after another, the wrappings of hide and burlap were unlashed and thrust into the saddlebags.

Ready for action, Parlen mounted and let the thoroughbred drift down upon the ranch, aslant the drive of the blizzard.

His plan had been to stampede the herd by firing the barn and feed sheds. The storm offered a more certain method of destruction. He would first open the big corral and drive out the herd. They would drift before the blizzard to the big coulee where the bank dropped off twenty feet or more. Morning would find most, if not all, piled up in a mangled, smothering mass. At the thought, gloating hate burned in the schemer's veins, warming him against the icy blast of the storm.

Yet that would be the least part of his vengeance on his cousin and old Kiowa. He would lurk in the barn until the herd had drifted too far to be headed back to safety. Then would come the firing of the barn and sheds and bunk-house. Easy enough to pick off Joe as he ran out into the glare of the burning buildings. Everyone would be facing the fire. No one would see the flash of the rifle through the gray murk of the storm. The silencer would muffle the sound of the shot.

No, not by any possibility could the scheme now fail. Every move was certain of success, and no less so the follow-up. He would not be seen or heard. The blizzard would cover his tracks. Best of all, they would find the horsehair *reata* of Mex Chavez looped upon a corral post, as mocking proof that the Mexican had come back to avenge the killing of his partner.

Then, after a few days' wait for the news to spread, what more natural than that the owner of the Circle B should come with offers of aid for the Seven Up? Who would be able to say that his sympathy for the widow was not genuine? As for old Kiowa, with ruin not only staring her in the face but already upon her, she would have to come to heel. Joe being out of the way "for keeps," Mary would listen to reason.

This time there would be no false moves — no outbursts of passion. The owner of the Circle B would wait. He would say nothing of love, but much of friendship and the future of her child. This would be his line of certain approach. For the sake of the baby, she would —

A lessening in the fierce drive of the blast told that the thoroughbred had reached and rounded the corner of the feed sheds. The schemer swung off, tied the bridle reins to the nearest rail of the corral, and hurried down the outer side of the big enclosure, one numb hand feeling along the rails for the gate.

The howl and roar and furious swirling dimness of the blizzard hid from him all sight and sound of what the corral held within its high barrier. He had no slightest inkling that another prowler had taken advantage of the night storm — another destroyer as murderous as himself.

Both history and freak weather had repeated itself. Like her mother, Gotch Ear, Splay Foot had drifted down out of the hills in the thick of the spring blizzard, to glut her ravenous hunger upon Seven



Up calf meat. Like her mother, she had come nosing to the corral, had backed off, and bounded upwards.

The difference was that now the already high barrier of posts and rails had been topped with close-set triple strands of barbed wire. Splay Foot did not know of this recent addition to the corral, and in the dense swirl of snow even her night-piercing eyes could not see the wires. She struck the topmost strand, and rebounded as from a bowstring.

Unexpected as was the shock, she twisted catlike in mid-air and landed on all four feet. Craft and experience sent her nosing around to the gate. Its new bars had been set so close together that not even a young coyote could have squeezed between. She tried another leap, and found a mesh of barbed wire above the bars.

But from within the corral the gale drove into her quivering nostrils the rank scent of the herd, huddled under the lee of the feed sheds. Even in the bitter drive of the blizzard, her jaws drooled with slaver. Famine was gnawing at her shrunken stomach.

Frantic for meat, she nosed around to the far side of the corral. There, with the heavy storm blast pushing from behind, she dashed up a gentle slope and leaped with her utmost skill and strength. It was a tremendous leap—a leap that would have been impossible without the buoying uplift of the gale.

The out-thrust forepaws of the she-wolf shot up above the top of the highest strand—they shot over it. After them followed her huge gaunt head and

thick forebody. Up jerked her hindquarters as her head went down. One leg alone grazed the wire. A sharp barb tore through the skin. But the leaper came down inside the corral feet foremost.

In the wild uproar and confusion of the blizzard, a young calf had become separated from its mother. Blundering out from under the lee of the sheds, it was being shoved by the blast towards the lower side of the corral.

One snap of Splay Foot's great jaws made an end of the calf's blatting distress — and its life. The she-wolf fell to gorging herself. She was out for meat, not for sport. She must feed herself with utmost haste, and return to feed and warm her young cubs.

The storm spared her the delay of killing the calf's mother. She devoured her feast with wolfish voracity. Her present great hunger and her bitterly acquired knowledge of the famines that all too often followed feasts, goaded her on to glut herself to the utmost, even after she began to feel gorged.

This time history did not repeat itself. Unlike the other May blizzard, which had blown itself out in the midst of Gotch Ear's feast, the night storm continued to rage.

Unable at last to devour another mouthful of the tender veal, the daughter of Gotch Ear swung away from the carcass, instantly intent upon returning to her hungry cubs. She ran down-wind to the lower end of the corral and leaped. The barbed wires hurled her back. She tried again, with a better take-

off and even more spring in the jump. Again she struck the taut strands, and rebounded.

After the second failure, she crouched, snarling with baffled fury. She was trapped—rather, she had trapped herself by her over-gorging. So heavy was she with the weight of meat she had eaten that she could not bound out over those stinging, unbreakable vines on the corral top. Yet what she could not clear in one leap, she might be able to climb.

A third bound, straighter up than the others, gave her a hold with her forepaws on the top rail. Her hind paws found footing on rails below. She made a frantic struggle to scramble up over the wires. The top ones were bracketed out from the other strands. Joe and Kiowa had not yet bought their pure-bred dairy stock, but they had prepared to protect the expensive animals. Unable to climb above the overhang, Splay Foot fell back into the corral.

Coyotes, and perhaps even some gray wolves, would have cowered in hopeless dread, or dashed at the walls of the great trap, frenzied with terror. Splay Foot started to nose along the rails, in search of an opening. Once, down at the Circle B ranch, she had sneaked out like a fox, through a hole, when Taylor Brent had made one of his unexpected night inspections of his corral.

No need for her to get flurried. If she could find no hole, she had only to wait. Long before dawn the weight of meat in her paunch would turn to strength



in her limbs. She would then be able to leap out of the trap.

Her round of the fence brought her to the gate. Wild as was the swirl of snow, her piercing eyes made out a gap that had not been there when she nosed the gate from the outside. One of the bars had been lifted out—another one was moving. She crouched and waited, every nerve and muscle and sinew tense. The instant the opening had widened enough, she would leap through and dash to safety in the ghostly murk of the blizzard.

Parlen dropped the freed second bar, and pulled out one end of the third. He swung it clear of the post on that side, and jerked the other end from its slot in the opposite post. As the end dropped, he glimpsed a dim shape hurling at the gap.

In the act of rebounding from her out-leap, Splay Foot came near enough to leeward of Parlen to catch his scent. Her wolf memory may have retained no visual pictures of the cruelties with which this human had tortured her when she was chained to the dog kennel. She may have forgotten the glaring white club-end with which he had bitten that deep scar on her shoulder. But she had not forgotten the scent that meant tormenting pain and savage hate.

With a ferocious snarl, she whirled in mid-air. Warned by the frightful cry, Parlen jerked out his pistol. One glimpse of the beast's glaring eyes, a single wildly aimed shot—and the she-wolf hurled against him.

The shock knocked the pistol out of his hand. He tottered over backwards, one hand and arm upflung to ward off her slashing fangs from his throat. His other hand clutched out in frantic gropings. Its fingers felt and gripped fast the she-wolf's slit ear.

He fell heavily on the wind-packed snow, dragging the she-wolf after him. Her long fangs had already ripped his arm to the bone. They slashed through the flesh again and again, in her fierce attempts to get at his throat. Her claws tore his slicker to ribbons — ripped into his clothes and the skin of his body.

He began to shriek for help.

## CHAPTER XXVI

### SPLAY FOOT'S LEAVINGS

**I**N THE Seven Up bunk-house the first roar of the blizzard had roused Limpy and Swede. The big puncher had rolled out to shut the slide window. After that he and Limpy soon were as fast asleep as Rocker.

Over in the house Kiowa and Joe and Mary had wakened, closed the windward windows, and drawn up the blankets on their beds. Joe drowsily recalled to Mary that in just such a freak May blizzard as this, old Gotch Ear had given them their chance to track her and find her hole and pups.

“My poor old buckskin pony!” murmured Mary. “Remember how I cried? But you finished Gotch at last—and Splay Foot can’t harm us now.”

“If she can jump that wire, I’ll give her the whole herd,” offered Joe, with the certainty of one who bets on a sure thing.

The stir had failed to disturb the baby in his cozy old cradle. As with Swede and Limpy and Kiowa, the very uproar of the blizzard soon lulled Joe and Mary back to sleep. All was snug and secure with them and the Seven Up.

Of a sudden Joe found himself bolt upright in bed. Mary was clutching his arm.

“Wh-what —” he muttered.



“Sh-h-h! Listen! That sound——”

“Only your crippled hound howling. If he’d keep in his kennel——”

“No, no! I heard a shot — There! that screaming!”

Joe was already rolling out. As he jumped into his overalls and boots Mary lit a lantern. In the kitchen she had the shotgun ready before he could jerk on his slicker. He grabbed the lantern and gun, and dashed out into the storm.

Even had it been mid-day, the blinding swirl of snow would have shut off his view of anything a few paces away. But he could hear. Deafeningly as the storm howled and roared about the old log house, it brought down on its blast, with blood-curdling distinctness, the savage snarls of the she-wolf and the shrieks of the terrorized man whose throat she was seeking to rip open.

Joe rushed straight into the drive of the blizzard, holding the shotgun reversed to keep the snow from clogging the muzzles of the twin barrels. As he ran he shouted at the top of his lungs as often as he could catch his breath in the fierce icy gusts.

Closer and closer sounded the outcries of the struggling beast and man. Despite the furious attempts of the blizzard to slacken his rush, Joe was rapidly nearing the corral. The screams suddenly grew faint. He shouted his loudest and fired one barrel of the gun into the air.

With the roar of the shot the ferocious snarls ceased as if the load of buckshot had riddled the

gray beast-devil. Close ahead, to the left, Joe fancied he saw a dim something glide swiftly aslant the driving snow. He swung the gun around and blazed away with the second barrel. But the shadowy form had vanished, and no yelp or yell answered the booming report. The wolf had either been killed, or else had made off, unwounded.

No time now to look. Joe rushed on. Almost at once he ran up against the corral gate. The three lower bars lay in the snow. Across them was stretched a writhing human form, with ripped and tattered clothes, and bare, slashed arms tight-clasped over face and throat.

Without stopping to look at the hidden face, Joe heaved the heavy man up on his shoulder and ran staggering down-wind to the house. At his shout, Mary threw open the door. The blast that swirled in with him blew out the lamp. But his lantern still glowed, and old Kiowa relit the lamp the moment the thrust of Mary's lithe strength closed the kitchen door.

Joe laid his gasping, groaning burden face up on the old bench beside the table. The fang-ripped arms fell down on each side. The face of the wounded man was smeared with crimson, but it had not been mangled.

"Parl!" cried Kiowa.

Mary came darting with her floursack dish towels for bandages.

"Oh, Joe! Is — is he ——"

"No — arms covered his throat."

Kiowa ripped a towel and knotted it around the torn left arm.

"Pass me my gun," she said. "This here's an artery. He'll bleed white, 'fwe don't get a move on."

But a few twists with the barrel of the old six-shooter in the knotted cloth stopped the spurting scarlet. Joe hastened to build a fire. The other fang slashes, which covered Parlen's arms from hands to shoulders, were sterilized by Kiowa and Mary with carbolic acid.

The wounded man had ceased to gasp for breath. But he lay moaning in a stupor that bordered upon delirium. He did not open his eyes until, cushioned and blanketed in Kiowa's rocking chair, he felt at his lips the cup of coffee held to them by the hand of Mary.

As he gulped down the hot drink he stared vacantly from under half closed lids at the three anxious faces downbent above him. His twisted lips parted to let out a mumbled question:

"'M I—done for?"

"Lord, no," Kiowa reassured him. "But you're lucky it must have been a youngish lobo. 'Stead of chewing and crushing bones and all, you were only slashed with sharp teeth. All the bites bled clean, and we've swabbed 'em well with carbolic. If 'twasn't for that, you'd be a goner, sure as shooting. Y'ought to know a lobo's bite is 'most as poisonous as a rattler's. Once had a calf just scratched in the skin by old Gotch Ear. It died of blood poison."

"It really was a lobo that jumped you, wasn't



it?" asked Mary. "Joe says the snarls——"

Parlen's white face flooded with angry crimson.

"Lobo? What else d'you suppose? That damned Splay Foot—your pet! The she-devil! To go and——"

"Splay Foot?" broke in Joe. "What makes you so sure? Easy to tell a lobo by the snarls. But——"

"You'd known sure enough if you'd had hold that slit ear, trying to keep her teeth out of your jugular!"

"What you so sore at us for?" queried Kiowa. "We didn't bite you. Way you looked when Joe toted you in, that she-devil had you going. If Joe hadn't made it from bed to corral in two-three jumps, you'd 'a' got yours."

"Don't, Gran'ma," begged Mary. "I'm sure Parl didn't mean to be cross. It's just that he's still all upset."

Joe chimed in with all his old-time good-humor:

"That's it. Close shave, Parl. But all's well that ends well. It's Mary, though, you have to thank. She heard you call, and wakened me."

Parlen looked at Mary. His face, twisted with pain and still flushed and frowning, smoothed out in a smile. But Kiowa was not yet appeased.

"Just a minute. Joe says he saw three bars of the cow corral down. I don't figger on even Splay Foot being smart as all that. You was opening the corral when she jumped you—the *cow* corral."

Parlen's drooping lids opened wide. He stared.

"Horse corral, you mean. Why, I'd swear — But no, that accounts for it. Beats all how a night blizzard turns you clear around. Couldn't make out why the barn wasn't there. Seemed as if it must have blown away. I felt along the rails and found a gate. Started to take down the bars to let my horse in. That infernal she-devil was inside. Soon as I opened up, she jumped me."

"Inside, you say?" queried Kiowa. "Inside the corral? You're dead sure of that?"

"Yes, absolutely."

From back of the rocking chair the old cow-woman gave Joe a meaning glance.

"You best go close the bars, son. Some the calves might leak out."

"There's Parl's horse, too," said Joe.

The neck cords of the horse's owner twitched.

"He's tied to the corral beyond the gate, Joe. If you'll turn him into the barn — Just heave the saddle up on the handiest rail. There's nothing in the roll or bags I'll want till I go on to town. You remember, Mary asked me to come around this way, next time I went in."

"Tough luck you slamming up against a blizzard and Splay Foot here, all the same night," gibed Kiowa.

"Certainly was, Aunt Ki. You'll find my pistol at the gate, Joe. She knocked it out of my hand before I could shoot the second time. Yes, I had intended to camp at sundown, but decided to push through without stopping. The blizzard was

as big a surprise as that dam — as Splay Foot.”

“Well, you best lean back and rest. You’ll need it, losing all that blood. Go on, Joe. Mary’ll help me tilt the chair and brace it.”

Joe took his pistol and lantern, and went out again into the storm. The wind was beginning to lull. But, unlike that other Maytime night blizzard, it had not suddenly blown itself away, along with the snow clouds. The flakes were still falling. Splay Foot, unlike her mother, would leave no trail.

He found no cows or calves near the gate. His innate kindness towards animals sent him first along the outside of the fence to the thoroughbred. He led the shivering horse to the barn and gave him a big feed of oats. The dry snow brushed off easily. He heaved the saddle up on the high wall of the box stall, without removing Parlen’s bed-roll and saddlebags.

Back at the cattle corral he went in and looked over the snow-covered ground behind the closely packed herd. From the corral he returned to the house.

Parlen lay at ease in the backward tilted rocker. Though he seemed to be asleep, the cords of his neck twitched when Joe came in. Mary had gone to make sure the baby was all right.

Kiowa put a finger to her lips.

“Sh-sh!” she whispered. “He just dropped off. How ’bout — her? Was he lying?”

“We’ll add another top wire,” said Joe. “I thought it impossible for even her to make such a



jump. But there was the calf to prove it—what she didn't eat. Too bad Parl blundered into the wrong corral. She was trapped—had gorged so much she couldn't jump out. Then Parl opened the bars. She bolted through. He being in the way, she jumped him."

The cords of Parlen's neck stopped twitching. His tense face relaxed.

"Reckon he had it coming to him," gibed Kiowa. "The big she-devil prob'ly hadn't forgot how he branded her."

Joe's face darkened.

"Being branded is no fun. Far as you're concerned, I've tossed it over my shoulder. But there are plenty of buckaroos right now who'd call me 'Homicide Kid,' only they're afraid I might repeat the alleged performance."

"What of it, son?" soothed the old cow-woman. "Your uncle had it coming to him, and so did Hooch—the thieving, burning rustler!"

"That doesn't help me any, Gran'ma. Maybe it was me, or maybe it was Mex, who finished Hooch. But I didn't pull trigger on Uncle Lor. All the same, I'm branded for life. Even you still think I did it. Mary is the only one who believes me, and she may sometime come to doubt the truth. *Branded!* Just because I keep my mouth shut, is no sign I don't feel the burn. It's there all the time, scorching in deeper and deeper!"

"Shucks!" muttered Kiowa. "Never figgered you felt that bad about it, son. I'm going to start

in, right off, spilling around it was Hooch done it. Keep harping at anything long 'nough, and folks'll believe it's so. Hooch or Mex could've sneaked Parl's rifle, just as you said he might've. Anyhow, he ain't here to deny it. We'll saddle the killing on him—the dirty brand-blotter!”

Joe put out his hand in a gesture of hopelessness.

“It's no use. With Hooch dead and Mex gone, we can't make them own up. We have no proof, and never will have. Even you still believe I did it.”

Kiowa tried to speak, and failed. She was not a ready liar.

“You see,” said Joe. “I'm branded—branded for life. Worse than that—the iron will not stop at me. There's Baby. He'll be burned, too. They won't know him as Mary's boy. He'll be branded the son of the Homicide Kid.”

## CHAPTER XXVII

### FOR FAVORS RECEIVED

**T**HOUGH the blizzard blew itself out long before morning, the snow continued to fall until sun-up. It had so covered the trail of Splay Foot that Joe made no haste to go out after the returned cattle-killer. Her desperate leap into the corral meant that she had a litter of young pups to feed. For a month or more the pups would keep her from shifting off the Seven Up range.

The first need was to make another raid on the herd impossible even for her amazing power as a leaper. In the two days required to heighten the corral with more barbed wire, the return of normal balmy May warmth melted off all the snow.

Parlen had at once begun to rally from his blood-loss and the shock of his wounds. Thanks to their free bleeding, and the quick use of carbolic acid by Kiowa and Mary, the gashes made by the she-wolf's sharp fangs healed rapidly. But Parlen saw to it that the lacerated arms continued to hang limp in their slings. With many apologies for his helplessness, he permitted Mary to feed him as if he were a two-year-old child.

His weakness, however, was not all shammed. When, on the afternoon of the first day, he insisted



upon wading out through the slush to look at his thoroughbred, his knees really wobbled.

In the barn he dropped on a pile of hay and lay resting until Rocker stumbled out to help with the new wiring of the corral. Parlen at once staggered to his feet and went into his horse's stall. Behind cover of the stall's high side, his bandaged arms shot up out of the slings. The movement gave him such agony that he barely stifled a cry. Though his arms had not been as disabled as he had pretended, the she-wolf's long fangs had ripped deep into the flesh.

His torn muscles, however, obeyed the urge of his deathly fear, and his bitten hands had not been mangled. He was able to grope with the bandaged fingers. Frightful as was the pain, he managed to fumble from the saddlebags the telltale hoof-muffles of rawhide and burlap and the horsehair *reata* of Mex Chavez. By the time he had them safely hidden under a pile of wornout harness and saddles he was so exhausted that he barely managed to totter back to the pile of hay. Yet now he felt safe against discovery. He could relax and begin to regain his strength for another attempt.

At sundown he was wakened out of a deep sleep by the racket of Rocker doing the barn chores. This time he had to sham weakness. He rather over-acted. His legs seemed so very tottery that Joe and Swede carried him to the house.

On the third day he began openly to use his hands and arms a little, but complained much both of the genuine pain and of his sham weakness. He kept re-

peating his regrets that he could not go out with Joe to help him get Splay Foot. This was a lie. What he wished was to be left alone with Mary. Yet his desire for the death of the she-wolf was bitterly sincere. If she had not interfered with his plans, the Seven Up would have been ruined and Mary become a widow.

The second evening had seen the corral wiring completed. Dawn of the fourth day Joe started off into the Yamparos. His outfit was light, for he had been pondering on all that he knew about wolves in general and Splay Foot in particular, and he had a "hunch."

All that day and the next morning Parlen continued to sham weakness. Splay Foot's slashes had lacerated more than one nerve in his arms. His real suffering gave him a genuine basis upon which to work for a deepening of Mary's sympathy. He had heard the old saying that pity is akin to love. He relied on this and on her gratification for his seeming tenderness towards her baby.

It was plain to see that she now trusted him as a friend and relative, and was beginning to like him again. Only, sour old Kiowa aggravatingly persisted in afflicting them with her company. She never gave him a moment alone with Mary.

Towards twilight of the second day after Joe had gone, Kiowa for once relaxed her vigilance. She went to the barn, leaving Mary in the kitchen with the visitor. Parlen insisted upon taking out the crippled wolfhound's pan of bones in his own crippled

hands. It gave him the chance to make sure that Kiowa was out of hearing. He patted the broken-spirited dog, gave him the bones, and hastened back into the house.

Mary, with one foot rocking the old cradle, had started to sort her basket of mending. Parlen drew up a chair close beside her.

"It's a shame your having to darn and patch old rags like those," he murmured. "If I'd been the lucky one, Mary, instead of him, you'd have your silks and satins. But of course, as long as you chose him—You've given me your sympathy, Mary. No need to tell you how highly I value it. Remember that, when you find you need mine."

Mary looked up, her clear blue eyes puzzled.

"When I— What do you mean?"

"Well, I hardly like to say anything. Still, it's not fair for him and Aunt Ki to keep things from you. The night I was hurt, when I was in a faint from loss of blood, I came to just enough to hear him admit to Aunt Ki that he was branded for life by what he had done—to Uncle Lor."

"I don't believe it," said Mary, her eyes suddenly like ice. "You must have been out of your head."

"If only I could think I was, Mary! But that was the least of it. He went on to say how the iron of the killing would burn clear through and brand your baby. People would not know the boy as your child, but as the spawn of the Homicide Kid. If that's not admitting he killed Uncle Lor, what is?"

"I don't——"



"Of course not," Parlen broke in. "I'm not expecting you to. All I ask is that you make him tell you whether it isn't true, before you let him know who it was told you. I'm sorry to have to be the one to open your eyes. But it's the truth—just what I've told you. He'll admit it if you pin him down to facts. He told Aunt Ki the shame of it is with him all the time, burning in deeper and deeper—especially that about the baby—what he had done to spoil his future."

Mary dropped down on her knees to look close at her sleeping child. He was a plump, lusty young man of five and a half months, with a mop of golden-red hair, six teeth, and eyes as blue as her own. Her nearness wakened him from his nap. Both teeth and eyes displayed their charms in the wide smile that accompanied his gurgling chuckle of delight.

Parlen thought he saw Mary wipe a tear from her eye. He bent down and drew his right arm from its sling to lay it across her shoulders. Mary canted her head a little and suddenly sprang up. She darted to the rear door. Joe came swinging in.

Always before in Parlen's presence the young husband and wife had shown themselves very reserved. Now Joe either did not see his cousin, or else he was too glad to care. He threw his arms about Mary and kissed her. She clung fast to him, holding up her face for more kisses even when he would have released her.

"Oh, I've missed you so, sweetheart!" she cried. "It's good to have you back with me and Baby—"

my big-hearted, clear-eyed, straight-tongued boy who never stoops to lying and meanness!"

Joe's tanned face reddened with embarrassment.

"Aw, say, Mary, cut it out. Parl won't savvy. He's not hitched to an A-one side-kick like you, old woman."

"I should say not! There never has been any chance of his roping me. What he wants is style and cows. Money talks—to money. Which of the Goodmorrow girls are you going to rope, Parl?"

Parlen had turned his back. He was staring down at the baby. The child's chuckling ceased. The smile left the dimpled cheeks. Parlen moistened his dry lips with the tip of his tongue. The upwelling of his rancor forced out a gibe at his cousin.

"You—back sooner than— Quit, did you?"

Joe grinned good-naturedly.

"Not altogether. I missed the she-devil again. But I collected interest on what she owes us. Had a hunch to try the old hole. Gathered in all her pups. Laid for her. Had she been any other wolf-mother, I'd have brought in her scalp. Moon last night, after a flurry of snow up there that stayed on till sunrise. But she's even slicker than was old Gotch Ear. Not a peep of her—no tracks. She must have spotted me, savvied the pups were gone, and vamoosed."

"Yes," agreed Parlen, with a sudden change of tone. "It was no use your hanging around the old hole after you got her pups. She'll never come near it again. What do you care, though? You have

Mary—and missing Splay Foot keeps you on the Government payroll.”

“You mean——”

“No, I don’t. Forget it, kid. I was only scratching you for fun. You’d be on edge yourself, tied up like this—with your arms like a dozen toothaches. As you see, though, I’m beginning to be able to use the right one a little—enough to hold my reins. I’ll start on for town at sun-up.”

“Why, if you must go——” said Mary, before Joe could urge the guest to continue his visit.

Parlen understood. By the look that went with the girl’s words, he knew that she knew what he had been driving at in his crooked way. Still more, from her greeting of Joe and from her taunt about the Goodmorrow girls, he knew that he had no more chance of winning her than he had of roping the moon.

Her marriage to Joe had served only to add the hell-fire of jealousy to the hidden volcano of his passion. But now the certainty that his craving for her was hopeless, turned his selfish love into bitterness and hate. All night he lay in torment, planning a revenge that would strike her even harder than Joe.

In the morning, while Mary was cooking breakfast, he went out to overlook Rucker’s saddling of the thoroughbred. Easy enough to send the half-wit wrangler off on a fool’s errand and get the hoof-muffles and the horsehair *reata* into the saddlebags, unseen.



After breakfast, with hell in his heart and a smile on his lips, he insisted upon giving Joe and Kiowa, and then Mary, a feeble clasp with his poor, crippled, bandaged hand. He chucked the baby under the chin, and picked up the "snack" that Kiowa had put in a meal sack for his mid-day lunch.

"Good-bye," he said. "It's been a nuisance, I know, having a cripple round the house. But I won't forget how you've treated me. I'll pay you for it soon as I can."

"Forget it," replied Joe. "We'd do as much by a stranger. Now that we've squared the past, you're one of our family."

Struck with sudden fear of Mary's clear eyes, Parlen hurried out to his horse. As he hop-mounted, he called over his shoulder to Joe, who alone had followed him:

"Got to meet the afternoon train. S'long."

His horse jumped to the jab of his spurs and sprinted off around the old log house.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### WOLF WORK

**T**HE thoroughbred reached town in time for his rider to transact some unimportant business at the bank. He registered at the hotel, making careful display of his bandaged arms and his almost total inability to use them.

He spent the evening in the lobby, giving his fellow guests and the landlord a detailed account of the blizzard and how Splay Foot had mangled his arms. He ended by asking the night clerk to call him at dawn, as he would have to hasten back to the Circle B.

“Must watch my men close to see they don’t slack on their work,” he explained.

His tone and the remark alike reminded his listeners of his uncle. They quite understood—or thought they did—his urgent haste to leave town.

In the morning he loped away on the road to the Circle B until he came to a long stretch so hard and wind-swept that no one would expect to find hoof-prints on it. He swung off the road and headed across country for the Seven Up. At the first soft ground he tied on the hoof-muffles.

Shortly before dusk he led the thoroughbred up out of the north coulee, near where the dog pack had found the fresh trail of Splay Foot and her mate.

Limpy and Swede had herded in the cattle from their day's grazing. Under cover of the trees on the ridge, Parlen watched Joe help the punchers drive the herd into the corral for the night. Rocker went around the end of the barn, swaying from side to side. Mary came briskly up the path from the spring house, followed by Kiowa with the baby. All members of the Seven Up outfit were following their present evening routine.

The watcher tied his horse to a pine branch, ate sparingly of the food he had brought from town, took off the shirt lent to him by Joe, and removed the bandages that most interfered with the free play of his almost healed muscles. He put the shirt on again, packed the strips of cloth in the saddlebags, and stretched out to rest.

His plans called for a wait of only two or three hours—time for all at the ranch to turn in and fall asleep. He could wait that long without impatience. In fact, it gave him the chance to lie there with his eyes fixed upon the lamplit kitchen window and gloat over the perfection of his coming revenge. It would be complete—it would hurt Kiowa and Joe far more than the mere ruin of the Seven Up—it would tear Mary's heart out of her bosom.

Best of all, it would be safe. The moon, instead of hindering, would enable him to carry out the scheme exactly as planned, and he would then have all day to make his getaway. By hard riding aslant the Yamparos, he could make home some time the following night. His men would believe he had been



up to his uncle's old trick of riding around to spy on them after a trip to town.

No need for him to worry over any possible ill consequences to himself. The scheme was absolutely safe. He could put out of his mind all fear of discovery and give himself over to the fierce joy of his malignant anticipation. No need here in the darkness to mask his hate behind lying smiles. He could give free rein to the devil within him that had been loosed first by his jealous passion, and was now enraged beyond all restraint by Mary's final scorning of him.

A momentary flood of light from the kitchen doorway told that the men had finished supper and were going to the bunk-house. Another wait. Then the glow in the little windows went out, first at the bunk-house, next at the kitchen, last of all at the bedrooms. The buildings humped, dark and silent, under the pale light of the quarter moon.

Still another wait. At last Parlen looked at his watch, and got up to stretch himself. He started to untie his horse. Down the coulee came a wailing cry that sent the high-strung thoroughbred swinging around against his master and for a moment made Parlen's heart stand still.

Many as were the times he had heard the howl of a gray wolf, never before had it seemed so frightfully dismal and blood-curdling. For that moment of terror he doubted it was the howl of a wolf of flesh and blood. In an old book he had read of lost souls wailing in the anguish of hell.

Again the desolate howl quavered down the coulee. No mistake about it. The cry was a wail of grief and mourning, but it was the mourning of a wolf. The chilled blood suddenly spurted through the listener's veins in a quick-heating torrent.

Splay Foot! She knew the enemy who had robbed her of her cubs. She had trailed him home. No doubt Joe had brought the slaughtered cubs with him. She had come to mourn them, and to seek vengeance against their killer. Wolf vengeance.

Parlen chuckled. Nothing could have fitted in more perfectly with his scheme. Some of the ranch folks, perhaps all, must have heard that howl. Joe probably would turn out and lie in wait until the mourner showed herself or went back to the hills. But the delay was well worth while.

The human wolf stroked the forehead of his quivering horse and waited.

For a time the she-wolf was silent. Then her howl burst out again, so frightfully loud and near that Parlen snatched his pistol from its holster. His horse snorted and plunged, jerking to free the still untied bridle reins.

In the darkness between the pines Parlen saw a pair of glaring greenish-yellow eyes. He thrust out his pistol, but paused with his finger crooked against the trigger. At any instant the she-devil might hurl herself upon him, as she had so ferociously jumped him during the blizzard. Yet if he fired even one shot, the ranch would hear, and his second scheme would go the way of the first.

Torn between fear and rage, he cursed the she-wolf for a hell-hound. At the sound of his voice the glaring eyes vanished. He waited, in an agony of suspense, with the pistol held ready for a quick shot.

After some time he realized that his horse had become quiet. Yet he continued to grip the pistol until he heard the howl of the mourning she-wolf far off along the coulee ridge. She was returning to the hills.

Rather more than an hour later he tied his horse to a tree in the ranch creek gulley, at the in-forking of the little ravine of the spring-rill. Before reaching the coulee he had swathed his boots with the burlap strips in his saddlebags. They left no tracks when he circled around back of the corrals to the far side of the barn.

Inside the barn he had no need to grope about or guess. He knew exactly where to start his fire. As he skulked back around the corrals his fingers itched to thrust matches into the old waste hay at the corner of the feed sheds. But that might betray him. The fire must seem to have been due to the carelessness of Rocker or one of the other men.

He had calculated so well that the flames did not burst out through the side of the barn until he had returned down the creek gulley. As he skulked up along the rill thicket to the spring-house, the crippled wolfhound ceased cowering in the dog kennel and crawled out to yelp and bark.

Almost at the same moment Kiowa smashed her window with the muzzle of her old Colts. Her shots



and screeches brought the three men tumbling from the bunk-house. Joe, quickest of all, came sprinting from the kitchen to lead the others to the barn. Kiowa flew after him, in boots and flannel nightgown.

Mary had stopped to put on a robe, as well as her shoes. But once started, her swift feet soon carried her to the burning barn. Though the fire was too far under way for the barn to be saved, Kiowa and the men were already running out with saddles and harness. Mary caught up a saddle blanket and began to beat out the sparks and cinders that swirled down towards the feed sheds.

None of the fire fighters looked towards the house. Even had they done so, the red glare of the barn would have blinded them to all objects out in the dim moonlight. Parlen stole across to the house and around the corner of the kitchen. The crippled wolfhound stopped yelping and whined his recognition of the man who had fed him. Parlen had a knife in one hand. He petted the hound with the other hand, gripped his collar, and suddenly gashed him several times as a wolf would strike.

Freeing the frantically struggling beast, Parlen darted back around the corner and into the house. The kitchen was dark. But Mary had lighted her lamp to find her robe. The baby lay in his cradle fast asleep. Parlen lifted him out with utmost care, then upset the cradle and dragged the coverlet from it in the hand that held his knife.

The baby did not waken. But as Parlen faced the dark little hall between the bedroom and the un-

lighted kitchen, he dropped the coverlet and drew his pistol. Behind his neckerchief mask his face went clammy with cold sweat.

So far the scheme had worked out exactly as planned. Yet if anyone had come back from the fire, he might be recognized. He was too tall to pass for Mex Chavez, even in a dim light. He fumbled his way hastily through the kitchen to the open rear door.

To his vast relief, he made out the two women and four men still scurrying around in the glare of the flaming barn. He skulked across to the shelter of the spring-rill thicket and down to the creek gulley.

The jolt of his upswing into the saddle awakened the baby. The child started to cry. Parlen gagged him with his neckerchief and put spurs to the thoroughbred.

By dawn he was far up in the midst of the Yamparos. A certain long-remembered cañon had guided him to the east end of the ridge from which, years past, he and Joe and little Mary had crossed over to the lair of Gotch Ear. Instead of climbing the steep slope, he turned up the fork of the cañon that cut between this ridge and the ridge of the cave cliff.

Rough and broken as was the bed of the branch cañon, he spurred his horse up its narrow, twisting course. Of a sudden he realized that for some time—he could not even guess how long—the tread of his horse had been accompanied by an intermittent clinking. Certain of his safety, he had so given himself over to gloating upon his revenge that the noise

had failed to penetrate his consciousness. When now he stared down, he saw that two at least of the hoof-muffles had worn through.

But the cañon bed was too rocky to show any betraying prints of the thoroughbred's hoofs. He spurred the beast to a quicker gait. Time enough to rebind the muffles when they should come back down the cañon. If ever found, the scratches on the stones would tell only of shod hoofs—no more.

At last the tired thoroughbred scrambled around a turn that brought his rider in sight of the cave. Parlen tossed the reins over the horse's down-sagged head, and swung out of the saddle to lay the half-smothered baby on a ledge. As he pulled the coils of the horsehair rope from the saddlebags he wound them around his waist. If the child were ever found, the *reata*, left in the cave with him, would be considered the derisive token of Mex Chavez that he had avenged the killing of his partner by Joe.

With the slings that Mary had made for his slashed arms, Parlen fastened her baby on his back. The cliff ledges then offered little difficulty, though his arms were still very stiff and sore.

The thoroughbred had quenched his thirst at a small water hole. But the cañon bottom was barren, and he had not eaten since leaving town. He began working his way down-cañon, with his neck curved sideways to trail the reins clear of his hoofs.

Parlen saw the horse start off, but did not turn back down the lower ledges to stop him. The animal could not go far during the few minutes it would take



to climb to the cave and scramble down again. As the climber pulled himself up on the well-remembered shelf of rock at the top of the ascent, he saw the horse only just disappearing around the first bend.

He crept along to the jutting side of the cave mouth and stepped in the niche to catch his breath and rest his over-strained arm muscles. Here it was that Mary, with the slit-eared wolf pup in her arms, had threatened to push him off the cliff.

The remembrance keyed his rancor to a still higher pitch of malignant gloating. She had balked him of the last pup of Gotch Ear's litter. Now he had brought her baby to the old wolf hole. Let her save him if she could!

He peered around the jutting rock into the cave mouth. The passage was lower than he had remembered. To get into the cave, he would have to take the baby off his back. Otherwise it would be crushed against the sharp-cornered rocks of the passage roof. He could gloat over leaving the child to starve to death. But the thought of mangling that soft, warm little body was too horrible even for his almost insane jealousy and hate.

He took the feebly writhing baby from his back. It was blue from suffocation. That also was more than he could stand. He had no relish for the outright murder of so helpless a creature. For another thing, there was his neckerchief. In the darkness of the cave he might forget to take it away.

Relieved from the smothering folds of the neckerchief, the baby gasped into a cry that quickly rose

to a pitiful wail for his "Mama!" The big blue eyes gazed up through a blur of tears. They were so like Mary's eyes!

For an instant Parlen hesitated. Then his hate and jealousy flared up in venomous fury. Her baby — and Joe's!

He reached the child around the jutting rock into the cave mouth. As he crept after, along the narrowed shelf, he cast a sideward glance in under the roof of the cave passage.

Back in the blackness two fiery eyes were glaring at him. The cave dinned with a yell of fury. He grabbed for his pistol. The hilt was entangled in the down-sagged loops of the horsehair *reata*. Before he could free it, the she-wolf was upon him. He flung up his left arm to shield his throat, and sought to back around the cave-mouth corner.

Splay Foot hurled herself against him with all the strength and weight of her huge wolf body. He reeled, clutched frantically at the jagged rock, and toppled backwards down the cliff. In the plunge his left shoulder hit a ledge. The blow whirled him half over. He struck the cañon bed on his back, instead of head foremost.

The terrific shock knocked him breathless but did not stun him. He had so fallen that his eyes were upturned to the mouth of the cave. He saw the grim head of the she-wolf out-thrust from the brink of the cliff. She was glaring down at him.

Terrorized perhaps by the savage growls of the wolf, the baby had ceased to cry. But as Parlen

stared up at the fierce beast, he suddenly forgot himself in the realization that the child was up there alone, absolutely at the mercy of the merciless killer—lying right under the beast.

Horror seized upon him—horror and remorse. At any moment the she-devil might turn and crunch the child in those great jaws. He could feel the long fangs rend that tender little body. Cold sweat drenched his face.

No, the beast was still glaring down at him. There might yet be time. She may not have noticed the baby in the excitement of her attack. Or, more probably, her hate for him had stayed her voracity.

Of a sudden he became aware that he had drawn his pistol—that he was thrusting it up in his right hand. It seemed to fire itself. The she-wolf wrenched around sideways and backwards. Before Parlen could fire again she had disappeared from his sight. He pictured her terrible jaws closing on the baby and dragging the mangled body back into the lair for the devouring.

Frantic with horror, he sought to leap to his feet. He would run up the ledges—dash into the cave—kill that she-devil! His body hardly stirred on its bed of stone. His legs refused to lift or bend. He twisted over on his left arm. It doubled like a piece of rope. He dropped back and lay for several moments, completely bewildered.

Slowly the truth forced itself in upon his reluctant brain. His left arm was broken. He could not move either leg. From the small of his back down,



his body was paralyzed. His spine had been broken.

The numbness from the shock of his fall was beginning to pass. Agonizing pains began to torture him. To the horror of his remorse was added the dread of a death of slow torment. Black despair seized upon him. He thrust the muzzle of the pistol against his temple and jerked the trigger.

There was no crash and roar — no sudden hurling of his tortured spirit into merciful oblivion. Hard as his finger tugged, the trigger refused to draw back. He raised the pistol before his despairing eyes. The fall upon the rocks had jammed the automatic cylinder against the barrel.

With only one hand usable, he could not force the cylinder free and shuck another cartridge from the magazine into the barrel. He felt under the coils of the *reata* for the sharp-pointed knife with which he had slashed the wolfhound. The knife was gone. He must lie there and die by inches — as he had intended that Mary's baby should die.

## CHAPTER XXIX

### END OF THE TRAIL

**T**HE sides of the burning barn had fallen in upon the cinders of the roof before Mary yielded to Joe's urgings that she go back to the house and rest.

"No chance of the sheds catching now," he said. "Swede and I will keep watch. You and Gran'ma had better get back to bed—Limpy and Rocker, too."

The half-wit horse-wrangler stood apart from the others, wiping tears from his blackened cheeks with his scorched shirtsleeves, and bawling like a calf. Kiowa went to thump him on the shoulder.

"Stop your bellering, boy," she soothed. "Don't you mind my cussing you out. Mebbe, after all, 'twasn't your fault. Might 'a' been a stroke of lightning. Brace up now and forget it."

Magically comforted by the kindly words from his mistress, the wrangler sniffed and grinned and swayed off to overtake the hobbling Limpy.

Kiowa did not at once follow Mary to the house. She lingered to make sure there was no sign of a night wind that might yet swirl cinders from the ruined barn over on the feed sheds. Joe called to her cheerily:

"Lucky it's happened with summer ahead of us,

instead of winter. We'll have a big new one here—regular dairy barn—before snow flies.”

“That’s the way to talk, son. You’re no quitter—no more than me. Nothing’s going to down us. We’ll show Parl——”

From over at the house came a burst of heart-rending screams. Mary ran out into the moonlight, frantic. Joe was first to reach her. She was so nearly beside herself that he could make nothing of her wild cries. He left her to Kiowa, and dashed into the house.

Mary had lit the kitchen lamp. Nothing in there to have alarmed her. He ran to the door of their room. A glance showed him the overturned cradle and out-dragged coverlet. On the corner of the coverlet was a dark smear. He held it up to the lamp. Blood!

As Parlen had calculated, Joe had heard the howls of Splay Foot. The remembrance now pierced him like a blade of frozen poison. He could see the great she-wolf skulking into the open house—see her bound upon the cradle—overturn it—drag out the baby.

The wide gaze of his horror-visioning eyes stared down at the cradle and across to where the coverlet had been dragged. Something on the skin rug glinted. He sprang to catch it up. It was a sharp-pointed little hunting knife, one of his boyhood’s most prized possessions, that Parlen had wheedled from him.

Another outcry from Mary sent him hurrying.



Swede had started to look for tracks. Around the corner of the kitchen he had come upon the body of the wolfhound.

"Lobo," he grunted, when Joe darted between Mary and her grandmother and stooped to look.

"That infernal Splay Foot!" added Kiowa. "I heard her howl."

Joe held up the knife.

"Here's the tooth that did it. See, Mary. Not a wolf, a man. . . . out of revenge. It's the knife I gave Parl years ago. He fired the barn to draw us all out, then gashed the hound so we'd think Splay Foot had taken Baby. Cherk up! If he'd meant to kill Baby, he'd have done it in there. Catch her, Swede!"

The big puncher carried the swooning mother into the house and left her to be cared for by her grandmother. Joe had not even straightened up. His hunt for footprints was already begun. He ordered the bungling Rocker into the kitchen.

Limpy brought a lantern and held it for the searcher. Beginning at the dead hound, they worked out in widening circles. Swede came from the kitchen with the old bull's-eye lantern that Kiowa always kept handy in her bedroom. Its focused beam proved far more effective than the other lantern. On Joe's next swing to the south, a slight scuff on the bare ground between the tufts of grass caught his eye. Beyond it appeared another scuff. A third made the trail certain.

"Thinks he's smart," giped Limpy. "Wropt his

boots in sacking. Forgot 'twas me told him and you how Cayuse Charlie uster rawhide the hoofs of the hosses he stole."

Joe made no reply. He was following the trail as rapidly as the faint scuff marks permitted. It led him to the spring-house and down along the bank of the rill. As he followed the trail to the creek gulley he recalled the day when he had used this same cover to slip up on his cousin — that day when Parlen had shown his cruel real self by branding the chained Splay Foot. This time he had sought to brand the she-wolf in another manner. He might have succeeded if he had not made the mistake of dropping the knife.

Down at the junction of the creek gulley the man-trail ended where the soft ground showed many round marks.

"Padded hoofs," said Joe. "Saddle up. Tell them."

While Limpy ran hopping back to the house and Swede cut across to the corrals, Joe studied the trails made by the horse. Which one was coming, and which going? There were no horseshoe prints to show the direction of the trail, and the thoroughbred was a clean stepper. Very careful examination at last disclosed a slight scuff on the down-stream side of one of the round prints.

Joe at once started along the trail that led up the creek. He came to where the horse had climbed the far bank of the gulley. The signs here were unmistakable. The horse had gone up, not down.

The others came loping along the gulley bank, guided by the flash of the bull's-eye lantern. Kiowa led, closely pressed by Mary. When told about the trail, Mary had jumped from her grandmother's bed. Nothing could persuade her to stay behind. She had dressed for riding even more quickly than had Kiowa.

Rocker continued to lead the mare. Joe could follow the trail faster afoot. It wound up alongside the gully bank to the crossing of the round-up road. There it led up the road to the round of the first hill.

Beyond the hill lay a stretch of close-grown grass that had been cut down short by the grazing of the herd. The trail of the padded hoofs disappeared from the road where it was crossed by a bare ledge of rock. The ledge extended out from the road a long way on each side. The wide-spaced patches of grassless ground along its edges were too greatly cut up with cow tracks to show the slight blur of the padded hoofs.

Red dawn found Joe still searching for the lost trail. He put out the lantern and cast around in a still wider circle, hoping to cut sign in the quick-brightening daylight. Mary kept close behind him. She would not leave him for a moment. But Kiowa and Rocker loped back to the ranch. They returned with oats for the horses and rations enough to last the searchers three or four days.

Joe had not yet found the slightest trace of the lost trail. He continued to look while he ate the food forced upon him by the old woman. She had been thinking over the situation.



"'Tain't any use all of us sticking here," she said. "We want to get every iron in the fire we can. Rocker's no use with a gun, but he can ride. We'll send him to town with a message that'll turn out a posse of two-three hundred men. Sheriff'll wire all up and down the railroad, and send word to every outfit within two days' ride. That'll head him off to the east and north."

Mary's grief-sunken eyes flashed.

"You go yourself, Gran'ma, and wire for that pack of dogs."

"No. We'll put 'em in Rocker's message. But me—I've got my own work cut out. I'm going to hit for the Circle B."

Limpy rolled his cud and spat.

"Huh— Never took you for a ijit, Aunt Ki."

She was too intent upon her plan to heed the thrust.

"Most the bunch he has on now are a decent sort. I know the folks of half of 'em. They won't stand for what he's done. If he's kept them hoof-muffles on his hoss, I can beat him to the Circle B, in case he's heading for home."

"You'll take Swede or Limpy," said Joe.

"Uk-uh. I'll ride your mare. Others couldn't keep up with her. Anyhow, my notion is he's circling, either out east, or round through the hills. You keep on hunting. You're bound to cut his trail, sooner or later. The crazy fool can't get away with a thing like he's done. Only, 'fyou come up on him, he's apt to be crazy 'nough to pop you from ambush.

That's why you want Limpy and Swede along."

Joe's reply to this was to take the notebook and pencil she had brought, and write the message to the sheriff. Mary pinned it in the pocket of Rocker's shirt, and told him to ride his best, for her sake and Baby's. Swede and Limpy had been shifting their boss's saddle to the mare. As Rocker jogged back towards the ranch, Kiowa hop-mounted and trotted the mare off southwards.

The herd, released from the corral by Swede before he saddled the horses, began to drift around the east slope of the hill. Joe sent Swede to head them back, and returned to his hunt for the lost trail. As he searched, he tried to reason out what course Parlen had been most apt to follow.

The chances were his cousin not only believed he had hidden his trail, but also that he had cast the blame upon the she-wolf. Once clear of the ranch, he probably had thought himself safe from pursuit. He might even have taken the pads from his horse's hoofs in order to travel faster.

At this point Joe got off the mental trail. Much as he knew about his cousin's meanness, he was incapable of conceiving a hatred and jealousy so inhuman that it could drive a man to the injury of a helpless baby. Parlen might intend to hide the baby, or to send him away where he would never be found by his parents. But that he should hurt or kill him was unthinkable. Therefore he could not have gone to hide in the Yamparos, where the baby must soon starve to death. He had either headed for his ranch,

or else swung out eastwards for the railroad.

So Joe reasoned, and he acted accordingly. He led Mary and the punchers in a hard ride straight eastwards across country, to the distant divide creek. Out on the lower range, the creek meandered along a broad, shallow bed. The four riders reached the creek shortly after forenoon, lined across the wide bed, and rode up its windings to the southwest.

Dusk found them among the outlying hills of the divide. Nowhere had they seen a print of a horse hoof in the flood-smoothed sand of the creek bed.

Afraid that a fire might betray their presence to Parlen, they supped on sandwiches of crackers and raw bacon. The men forced Mary to take all the saddle blankets for bedding. She insisted that she could not sleep. But, weary from the long day's ride, and exhausted by the strain of her anxiety and grief, she sank into deep slumber even while Joe was covering her up. He and Swede and Limpy took turns drowsing and watching.

In the gray dawn the old top-rider brewed Mary a big tin cup of sage and other herbs on a tiny fire of dry twigs. The bitter hot drink warmed and strengthened her for the day's ride. They ate more sandwiches of crackers and raw bacon as they started on up the creek bed.

Near the unfinished lean-to on the homestead they cut the trail of the mare. Evidently Kiowa had not "met up" with the kidnapper. Nor was there any sign of his trail, either above or below the usual creek crossing.



"That settles it," said Joe. "He took to the hills."

With the certainty that Parlen had not crossed the creek, Mary had sunk into a dejection of despair that came near to torpor. But at Joe's words, a flash of intuition set her lack-luster eyes aglow.

"The cave!" she cried—"I saw him look at Baby when you told about Splay Foot's pups!"

Joe acted on the "hunch" without stopping to argue probabilities. With so small a party it would have been useless to cut across through the hills in an attempt to comb them. Joe swung out along the round-up road. The longest way around would be the shortest in time.

Soon after noon hard riding brought them back to the point near the ranch where the trail had been lost. From here Joe struck up into the hills along the quickest route to the old wolf lair. Mid-afternoon he cut the first sign on the lost trail—scratches on a stony ridge slope where the calks of the thoroughbred's shoes had stuck out through the worn gunnysacking and rawhide. After this the trail was plain. The tough bronchos were pushed still harder.

Before long the trackers came up the cañon to the forks. Something moved among the bushes in a side cleft. The men spread out in front of Mary and rushed the cleft, with rifles ready to fire. They found the thoroughbred browsing on the brush.

"Keno!" cackled Limpy. "It's a cinch. We got him cornered."

"You remember the cave has two openings," said Joe. "Ride up the cañon with Mary, and cover the hole in the cliff edge. Swede and I will work around to the back door."

"I am going with you," said Mary. "If he kills you, he will have to kill me, too."

The tone of this permitted no argument. Joe put his tired broncho at the cleft, and Mary rode after him up the steep chute.

Limpy and Swede followed the cañon fork. By Joe's parting order, they started off slowly, to give the others time for the longer, harder climb around and over the crags of the ridge top. But Limpy soon convinced himself that they could sneak up and cover their entrance to the cave without alarming the kidnapper. He and Swede spurred their horses.

He was not, however, so certain of the landmarks as he had thought. Quite unexpectedly, on rounding a sharp bend, his upturned eyes saw the hole on the cliff brink. His outflung hand brought Swede to a halt as sudden as his own. They crouched in their saddles and backed their horses. But before the cliff shut off Limpy's view, his far-sighted eyes glimpsed the body lying on the rocks of the cañon bed, below the wolf cave.

Afoot, he and Swede stalked cautiously forward, keeping close under the cliff wall. The face of the out-sprawled man was turned down-cañon as if looking for help. When Limpy crept near enough to make out the features of that ghastly face he jerked up from his crouch and led Swede in a swift rush.

"Looks like his hoss spilled him," said Swede.

Limpy pointed up the ledges.

"Uk-uh. Must 'a' fell from nigh the top. Got what was coming to him. Back busted—left arm. Didn't cash in any too easy. Lookut his twisted face."

"Lookut that hosshair rope round him," said Swede. "I'll eat it if 'tain't that *reata* of Mex Chavez's. What's he doing with the greaser's rope?"

"Mebbe to help climb, or—" Limpy scratched his head, and made a shrewd guess — "More like, 'twas to put all the blame of his baby-rustling on the greaser. The dam' skunk! But, Lord A'mighty, where's the kid?"

Swede clutched the limp body and flung it over sideways. The bare rocks showed no sign of the missing baby. But an open pocket-memoranda-book and a pencil fell from the overturned body. Limpy snatched them up. On the open pages of the notebook were closely scrawled lines in Parlen's pain-shaken yet carefully legible handwriting. Limpy held the notebook well out from his far-sighted eyes and read slowly:

"'God help me—I am dying. I meant only to leave the baby, not to hurt him—But that she-devil Splay Foot knocked me off the edge. She got the baby——'"

Swede growled a curse:

"Hell's too good for him! I'm going to——"

"Hold on," said Limpy. "Thay's more. It says,



‘I will all my property to Mary and Joe Gale. Half is Joe’s by rights, anyway. I got Uncle Lor to unwill him. After that Uncle Lor tried to break his agreement to leave all to me. He started to unwill me, too—so I shot him. He got what he deserved. I am not sorry about him—but I confess the shooting, and leave my brand to Joe and Mary, hoping God will forgive me for what has happened to the baby. Parlen Brent.’”

“Ugh!” Swede grunted his disgust. “The cheap sport! Feeds the kid to the lobo, then tries to bribe God to keep him out of hell!”

Limpy had stooped to pick up the indelible pencil.

“Aw, let him fry. We got to get busy. This here will ain’t no good ’less it has two witnesses.”

“’Tain’t no good nohow,” replied Swede. “When we signed for the old man, you ain’t forgetting he told us a will’s got to be witnessed in presence of the willer. This here skunk’s deader’n a doornail.”

“What of it?” demanded Limpy. “He says it’s his will. Being his will, he wants it o.k., don’t he? ’Sides, how d’you know he’s dead? Didn’t he flop over when you touched him? Ten to one, nobody’ll ask no questions nohow. ’F any law sharp gets noseey, we only got to swear it’s Parl’s fist and his will, and he wanted it witnessed.”

“But if Joe and Miss Mary come and see him dead as a——”

“They won’t. Miss Mary best not see him, anyhow. We’re going to plant him *pronto* in that there pothole. Here’s the pencil. Stick your fist on the

line under mine. The Circle B b'longs to the kid and Miss Mary. They're a-going to have it, 'f I have to lick all the stuffing outer your ornery hide."

Swede already was gripping the pencil in his big fist. He scrawled his "E. W. Swede Moorland" under Limpy's "Alexander G. Smith."

The pothole was a deep, round cavity scoured out of the cliff-foot by floods. None too gently the body of Parlen Brent was lowered to the bottom. Over it the two punchers hastily started to build a cairn of the largest boulders they could carry.

## CHAPTER XXX

### THE SHE-WOLF'S LAIR

UP ON the ridge top Joe and Mary had come to a mass of broken rocks impassable for their horses. They left the animals grazing, and hastened on, over and between the crags.

At last Joe slowed down and crept forward to peer from a rock crest at the open ridge top beyond. Off to the left a narrow cleft twisted in among the huge boulder crags massed along the cañon rim. Neither cleft nor ridge top showed signs of any living creature.

Joe handed his rifle to Mary and took from her the bundle of resinous twigs that he had gathered coming up out of the cañon. With a whispered order for Mary to wait where she was, he drew his pistol and sidled along the rock crest to the entrance of the cleft. Mary followed at his heels. When he slipped over and down into the mouth of the cleft, she slipped after him, no less silently.

He motioned her to wait, but did not speak even in a whisper. They were at the "back door" of the wolf lair. As he crept along the cleft, Mary followed just far enough behind to leave room for him to jump backwards.

The cleft made two sharp crooks, then ran in under the crags. Joe paused to listen. No sound



came to him out of the blackness of the cave. Yet he had a feeling that something was lurking in there—something fiercely malignant. The hair of his scalp stiffened. In his nostrils was the rank smell of a recently occupied gray wolf den. But he had no thought of Splay Foot.

He visioned only his cousin, crouched there in the foul darkness over the huddled body of the baby. That the baby must be dead from starvation and exposure he felt all too certain. The spring nights in the Yamparos were apt to be dank and chill, and Parlen could not have brought any food that so young a child could eat. He knew nothing about babies, and Joe knew little more.

Thought of his tiny boy lying in there wan and stark brought Joe's teeth grinding together. What matter if his devilish cousin, crazed by the death of the baby, was lurking like a wolf, murderously eager to kill anyone who should enter?

The thrust of Mary's desperately urgent hand was not necessary. Joe had already drawn a match from his pocket. He crept on to where the narrow passage crooked sharply into the cave room. At the first touch of the lighted match, the dry resinous twigs flared. Joe tossed the flaming bundle around the rock corner into the main cave.

Out of the red glare came neither a curse nor the roar of a pistol. With his own pistol raised to fire, Joe peered into the torch-lit lair. . . . Empty!

"Gone!" he groaned "Bolted! If Limpy and Swede haven't headed him off——"

He lunged into and across the cave room. He started to twist around the turn into the other passage — and stopped short, to crouch, rigid. From his gaped mouth came a choking gasp. His out-thrust pistol wavered in his shaking hand.

Frantic with fear, Mary flung herself forward past him and around the turn. Less than ten feet away, in the bright sun glare at the cave mouth, she saw the huge gray form of Splay Foot outstretched upon the rock.

The she-wolf appeared to be basking in the sun, asleep — for once off her guard. She lay like a dog, with her jaws resting upon her in-doubled splay foot. Both her slit ear and the clear brand of the Seven Up on her shoulder identified her beyond all question.

But Joe's sudden horror had not been due to fear lest the murderous beast should rouse up and fly at him. He was staring over her shaggy gray shoulders at that which lay huddled in the curve of the she-wolf's under body and sideward-twisted hind-quarters — a torn-clothed round little body.

The little body stirred — a low cry wailed in through the cave passage.

Unlike Joe, Mary not only saw and heard — she believed her eyes and ears.

“Oh, God! God!” she gasped her gratitude. “Don't — don't shoot, Joe! My wolf-dog — my blessed wolf! . . . mothering Baby!”

“Wait!” warned Joe.

He clutched Mary's ankle — only to let go no less

suddenly as he realized the truth. Splay Foot had not so much as stirred. . . . Her sleep was the sleep from which even her wariness could not waken her.

Mary was creeping forward on her knees, sobbing thanks to the beast whose slit ear would never again prick up at any sound. But her voice did not go unheard.

The little body that was cuddled against the nipples of the she-wolf twisted around. Baby fingers grasped at the beast's shoulder. A red-gold head rose in line with the gray slit-ear.

Mary called to her baby. He gurgled and flung out his hands to her and started to crawl over the body of the cattle-killer. Only then Mary saw the blackened pool in a little hollow of the rock beside the she-wolf's branded shoulder. She clasped the baby to her bosom and drew back.

"Oh!" she cried. "Look, Joe. She saved Baby and drove Parl off. But he must have shot her as he ran—the coward!"

At the moment Joe had no thought for either the she-wolf or the human wolf. He was at Mary's heels, trying to crowd past her.

"Baby?" he asked. "Is he starved or—or much hurt?"

"No-no-no, not a scratch, bless him!—and as fat as ever . . . only hungry." Mary drew aside with the nursing child to make room for Joe to pass. "No wonder he's famished. My blessed wolf-mother could have given him only one meal before she died. But,



Joe, to think of her doing it for me — though you killed her pups!”

Joe said nothing. He had turned the she-wolf over on her branded shoulder and was looking at the hole of the forty-five pistol bullet low down in the beast's chest. Its position told him that she had been shot from below — undoubtedly by Parlen from down in the cañon.

He felt sure that the she-wolf had lived only long enough to whirl around with head away from the cliff brink. If the savage beast had fed the baby, it had been because she was too dead to feed on him. She had happened to drop alongside, instead of upon the baby and he had suckled her milk.

Yet why disillusion Mary? She believed her “wolf-dog” had been fond of her. Just possibly, that might be the truth. It was even possible, though not probable, that the cubless wolf mother had not died at once, but had intentionally suckled the man-cub of the human mother who had been good to her.

However that might be, Splay Foot was now dead . . . . and the baby safe. All that remained was to settle with the wolf man who had stolen the child and brought him into this deadly danger.

From down in the cañon bottom came thudding sounds. Joe thrust forward to peer over the brink of the cliff. Down below he saw Swede and Limpy fast piling up a heap of stones.

“Hoy!” he shouted. “What you doing? Parl's gone. Must have headed up-cañon. Look for his trail.”

Limpy pointed to the stone pile.

"He's gone to—where he b'longs. Splay Foot knocked him down the cliff. Busted him bad. Me and Swede're planting him. But he lasted long 'nough to make his will. He owned up he shot your uncle. Savvy that, kid? He cleared you of the killing, and give you and Miss Mary the Circle B."

"But the baby?" broke in Swede. "The devil let Splay Foot get him. You back up to Miss Mary. Hold her till me and Limpy can come up and bury the bones."

Out past Joe's shoulder thrust a golden head—then a smaller head of red-gold. Mary beamed down at the astonished punchers.

"You're coming up to help Joe close the cave," she said. "It's my wolf-dog's home. She saved Baby from—him. She died defending Baby for me. She shall lie here in her home. Nothing shall ever disturb her."

Joe did not grin, or even smile. He was very serious. His thoughts were in a whirl. They went back to that May day in his boyhood when here in the lair of old Gotch Ear he slit the ear of the only cub that Parlen had not been quick enough to smash with a stone. He had tossed the tiny she-wolf to little Mary.

Now, after all these years, the she-wolf—probably unintentionally, yet just possibly on purpose—had repaid Mary for all her kindness. Whether by accident or design, she had saved Mary's baby from the crazed kidnapper. . . .

And Parlen had come through. Dying, he had sought to right the wrongs he had committed. He had given his cousin and Mary his brand—the biggest brand in the Yamparo country. . . . What counted far more, he had blotted out the brand of murder that had been put upon his innocent cousin.

Joe's eyes widened with awe. Who was he to have such good fortune come upon him?

He drew back to where Mary, with her free hand, was stroking the scarred head of the she-wolf.

“You're right,” he said. “Here's where your pup started, and here's where she stays—scalp and all. I'm wishing her all the ghost-calves she wants in the Happy Hunting Grounds!”

“Oh, no,” differed Mary. “Not that. She's been so good to me. I hope—I believe she'll be a dog there—a kind, gentle, faithful dog.”

Again Joe did not grin, or even smile. Instead, he drew Mary and the baby close to him.







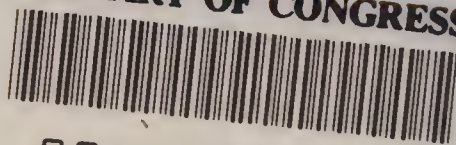




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